**Rockin' reads:** Our pick of the Summer's best musician memoirs

**GROUP TEST:** Get out-and-about with our choice of six ace in-ear headphones

# Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **490**

July 2022

# BOSS PLAYER

## Rega's Saturn Mk3 heads up the compact disc revival

**RETRO CHIC**
Grado's SR325x stylish open-back headphones

**BUYING GUIDE**
100+ essential components p109

**FOREVER YOUNG**
Ionic Originals, avatars... what the future of music might look and sound like

**JOIN THE PARTY!**
All the latest info on the forthcoming UK Hi-Fi Show *Live*

## Complete genius

Audiolab's Omnia – a new all-in-one system that delivers the goods

**NEWS EXTRA:**
Launches from Eclipse, Pro-Ject, Harman Kardon, Bang & Olufsen, Cambridge Audio, Elipson and more...

"SPOOKILY GOOD"

Ophidian's Voodoo 3-way floorstander's pure magic

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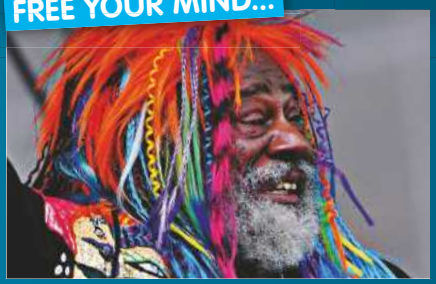

We salute the bonkers brilliance of George Clinton

"TOUGH TO BEAT"

Rotel's RA-1592MKII integrated amp is a champ

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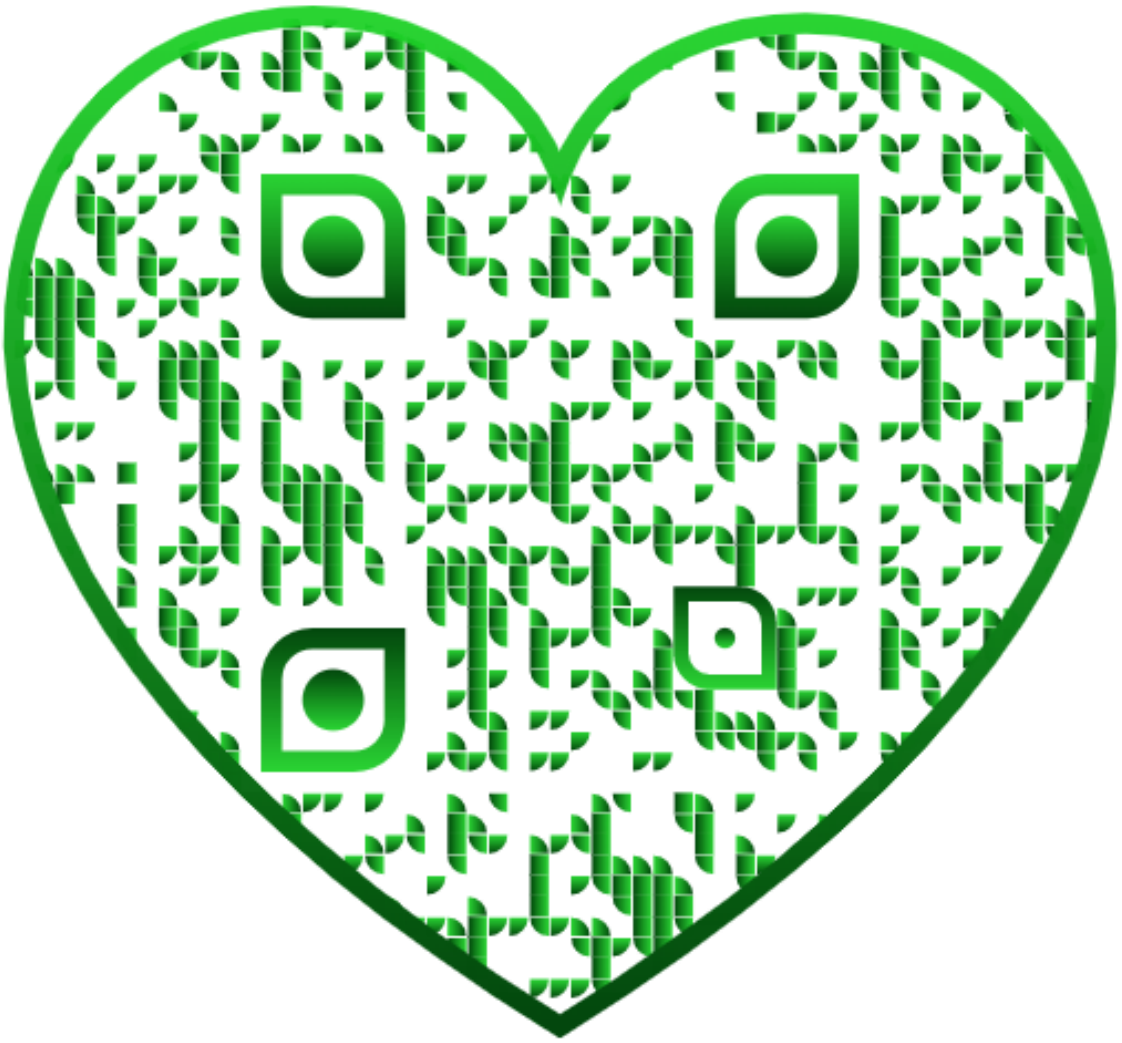

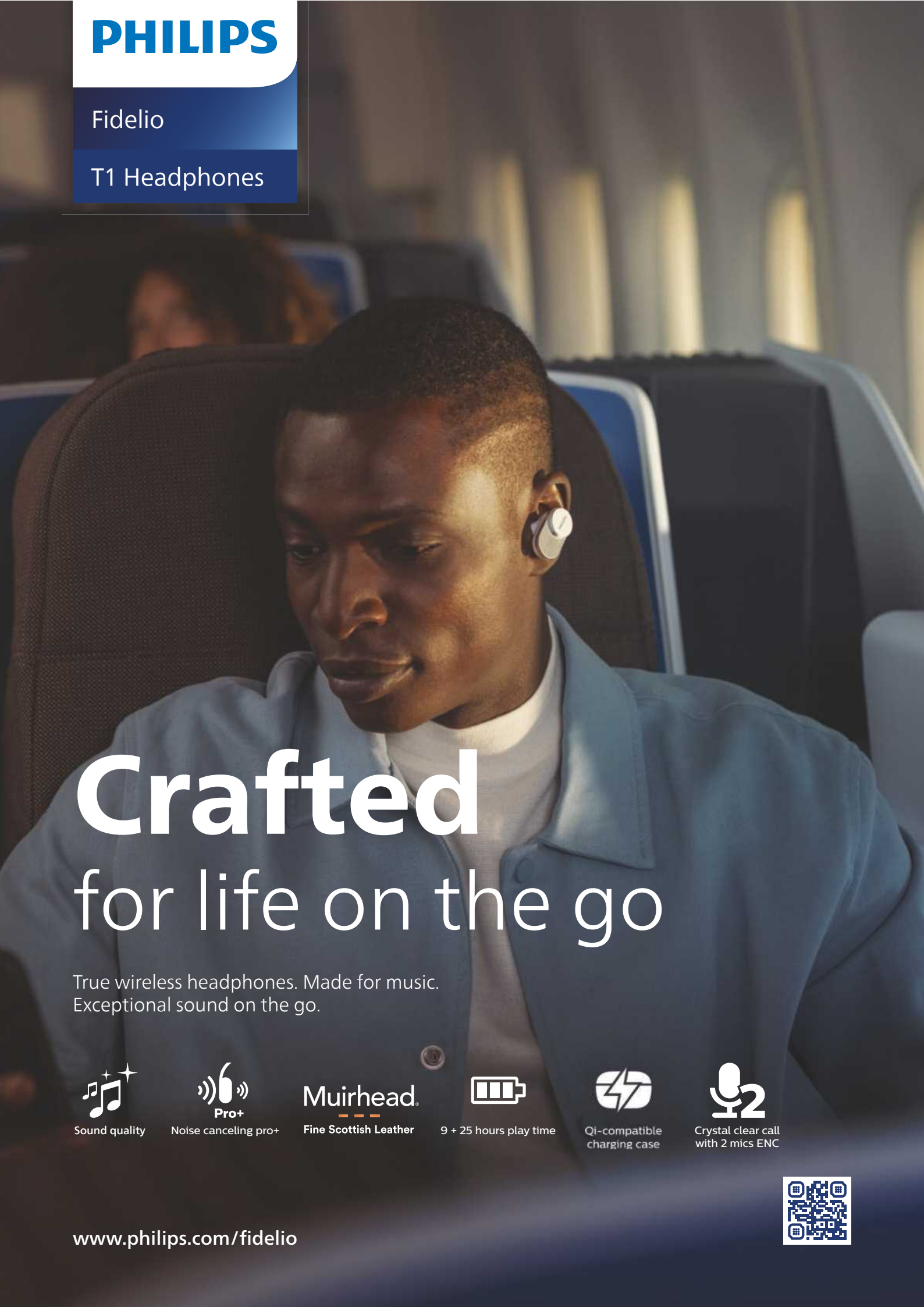
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Hi-Fi Choice
PASSION FOR SOUND

# Welcome

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Angel Olson picture credit: Angela Ricciardi

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**OUR AWARDS**

**EDITOR'S CHOICE:** Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance

**RECOMMENDED:** Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance

**GROUP TEST WINNER:** Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!

The big news is that CD sales just rose for the first time in 17 years in the US. According to data from the RIAA (Recording Industry Association Of America) orders for compact discs went from 31.6 million in 2020 to 46.6 million in 2021 – increasing by 47 percent. The last time sales of CDs were travelling northwards was way back in the early Noughties, the peak clocking nearly a billion discs shipping in the US in just one year. Streaming still accounts for the lion's share of the music industry's income in 2022, and the vinyl revival, despite the supply hiccups, continues apace. But CDs are back in business, the combination of their collectable physical presence, their handy size and their favourable cost in comparison with vinyl seeing a renewed affection for the little silver frisbees. Now, thanks to Rega and its new Saturn Mk3 (p56), there's a stellar player to enhance your listening pleasure. It's this month's cover star and: "across hours of listening to anything we can think of, makes music an emotionally pleasurable experience".

Also in this issue you'll find a *Group Test* of cool in-ear headphones, an appreciation of the guvnor of all things funky, Mr George Clinton, and a bumper *Audiofile* section of all the new kit that matters.

Have fun

**Steve Sutherland** Editor

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Hi-Fi Choice

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Picture credit: Shutterstock.com/Jamie Lamor Thompson (George Clinton)

# A fresh angle

## New directive speakers from Japan

**PRICE:** £300 EACH **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ECLIPSE-TD.COM/UK

**JAPANESE COMPANY ECLIPSE** has launched a new loudspeaker, the company's first in seven years. The TD307MK3 is a compact, full-range standmount which replaces the TD307MK2 and features the same technologies as Eclipse's more upmarket option. Boasting an integrated mounting bracket with angle adjustment, the new speaker enables wall or ceiling mounting and benefits from a 65mm full-range fibreglass drive unit upgrade (the first time fibreglass has been used in the TD307 series). The new driver is supported by a larger 'repulsive' neodymium main and sub-magnet system, which the company says delivers a wider frequency response, especially in the bass region: the TD307MK3 has a quoted 80Hz–25kHz range.

Eclipse claims the fibreglass cone also benefits from greater speed, lower vibration, greater dynamics, a lower noise floor and vibration has been reduced by 50 percent over its predecessor with an 80 percent increase in linearity.

Further improvements include a new terminal arrangement that accepts both bare wire and banana-terminated speaker cables, plus a new cable-routing design, with the ability to accommodate larger cables and obscure them from view. Eclipse says: "Achieving great sound quality for music, movies or TV is simple with the integrated angle adjustment, which provides -25 to 30° of movement when placed horizontally, plus 0 to 90° degrees when used on a wall or ceiling".

The new speakers measure 135 x 212 x 184mm (WxHxD), weigh approximately 2kg and come in black or white.

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# Going for a spin

## New deck from Cambridge Audio

**PRICE:** £1,700 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** CAMBRIDGEAUDIO.COM

**BRITISH COMPANY CAMBRIDGE** Audio has launched a new flagship turntable, the Alva TT V2 designed for spinning vinyl in a traditional hi-fi setup or wirelessly streaming to Bluetooth headphones, amps or speakers.

The new vinyl spinner is an update of the Alva TT (*HFC* 453) and is a direct-drive model with built-in switchable phono stage and aptX HD Bluetooth streaming. It retains the original Alva TT's heavy aluminium top plate and polyoxymethylene (POM) platter, pre-installed Alva MC cartridge and the aptX HD Bluetooth that allows 24-bit/48kHz hi-res streaming.

New features include an improved tonearm with detachable headshell (offering listeners an easy upgrade path), a switchable phono stage and the ability to toggle Bluetooth on/off as needed.

The switchable phono stage – based on the company's Alva Duo – offers listeners the flexibility and choice of using the Alva TT V2 with the phono stage in their existing stereo amplifier, while also making it easy to upgrade their system's components over time. Meanwhile, being able to switch the Bluetooth transmitter off when it's not needed means a shortened signal path and reduced energy consumption.

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*Stereophile, December 2021*

hi-finews OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

"...undoubtedly a technically clever loudspeaker, but engineered for one simple goal – making great-sounding music... you should definitely think about buying them."

*Hi Fi News, April 2022*

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# Take it E-asy

## New plug-in-and-play turntable range

**PRICE:** £270-£370 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** PROJECT-AUDIO.COM/EN HENLEYAUDIO.CO.UK

**PRO-JECT HAS INTRODUCED** the E1, a true plug-and-play turntable in a trio of different variants. The standard E1 is designed to be connected directly to an external phono stage, while the E1 Phono has one built-in. And for those looking for wireless transmission, the E1 BT offers Bluetooth streaming built-in as well.

The E1 range boasts electronically controlled playback speeds (33 and 45rpm), an 8.6in tonearm with aluminium tube and purpose-designed headshell, a pre-adjusted Ortofon OM 5E cartridge with elliptical stylus profile, a sub-platter drive system, an anti-resonant main platter made from strengthened ABS Polymer, a DC drive motor with damped mounting for added isolation, a wood main plinth mounted on anti-vibration feet, a turntable-ready RCA cable and a dust cover. The turntables measure 420 x 112 x 330mm (WxHxD) and weigh 3.5kg.

The E1 Phono features a built-in switchable moving-magnet (MM) phono stage while the E1 BT features the built-in switchable MM phono stage and Bluetooth wireless transmission. Both come with gold-plated RCA connectors. The finish options are gloss black, matt walnut or white and the standard E1 is finished with turntable-ready phono cables fixed to the underside of the tonearm. It has a standard phono-level output, for connecting to a phono stage and is priced at £270. The E1 Phono features a built-in switchable moving-magnet phono stage, so that you can connect directly to a line-level input or still make use of an external phono stage and is priced at £300. And finally the E1 BT features a switchable moving-magnet phono stage with Bluetooth version 5.0 wireless transmission so you can output at line level, phono or wirelessly via Bluetooth. It's priced at £370.

# Beaming with pride

## New soundbar with Dolby Atmos

**PRICE:** £800 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** HARMANKARDON.CO.UK

**HARMAN KARDON HAS** launched its new Citation MultiBeam 1100 soundbar, featuring Dolby Atmos and MultiBeam. As the name suggests, it employs the MultiBeam technology alongside its 11 drivers, including two up-firing height channels, to deliver Dolby Atmos.

Billed as: "A complete home entertainment system," the HK Citation MultiBeam 1100 offers access to over 300 online music streaming services through AirPlay, Alexa Multi-Room Music (MRM) and Chromecast built-in.

According to the company it also boasts: "Intuitive controls, an HDMI eARC connection and automatic room calibration for unrivalled connectivity and seamless setup," and features PureVoice technology with the centre channel designed with the intention of ensuring that: "speech is crystal clear at any volume."

The soundbar comes in Winter Gray or Classic Black real-wool fabric from Kvadrat, a dirt-repellent and flame-retardant tactile material.

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# Play to win

Danish company launches what it says is its most versatile true wireless earphone ever

**PRICE:** £350 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** BANG-OLUFSEN.COM/EN/GB

**BANG & OLUFSEN** has unveiled the Beoplay EX, the latest addition to its wearable audio portfolio and, the company claims, its most versatile true-wireless earphone to date. Differing most notably from previous B&O earphones in its shape, a new stem-based design has been adopted and the housing of the earphone placed inside the ear is smaller than ever before. Bang & Olufsen says the new shape creates space for a 9.2mm driver, the biggest ever used for a true-wireless device by the brand. The company says this results in a significant upgrade in the power without compromising on comfort. "Listening can last all day, as Beoplay EX has up to 20 hours of total playtime including charging in the case and six hours of playtime with ANC turned on".

Each earphone has three microphones, beamforming technology and own voice functionality built in.

B&O says it's stylish too: "From the mirror-like glass interface to the surrounding brushed aluminium ring, Beoplay EX creates a statement for the wearer whether they go for Black Anthracite, Gold Tone or Anthracite Oxygen".

The Beoplay EX comes with a matching, pocket-sized brushed aluminium charging case including Silicone and Comply Foam tips and a USB-A-to-USB-C charging cable and features Adaptive Active Noise Cancellation. With Multipoint connectivity, the earphones can also connect to two devices at the same time, allowing wearers to listen to music from one and make calls with the other. The new model is also IP57-certified dust resistant and waterproof.

# BAT

# "OUTSTANDING!"

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

"...an imperious blend of lush looks, audiophile engineering and stellar performance across all musical flavours."

**VK-3500 amp, Hi Fi News September 2021**

"more delicacy than my ears could process...Musical? Naturalistic? Intimate? Take your pick."

**VK-80i amp, Hi Fi News December 2021**

"this unashamedly expensive converter gets you closer to the music without you even realising it's doing it. Just let it weave its magic..."

**REX 3 DAC, Hi Fi News May 2020**

Balanced Audio Technology
**balanced.com**

karma
audio-visual

# Rose buds

## Debut integrated from Korean company

**PRICE:** £5,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ENG.HIFIROSE.COM HENLEYAUDIO.CO.UK

**HENLEY AUDIO IS** introducing the new HiFi Rose RA180 integrated amplifier to the UK, signalling a new category for the Korean brand. Designed to complement the RS150 (HFC 477) streamer and constructed from high-purity aluminium, the RA180 is based around a new concept Class AD amplifier technology, the company explaining that: "Class D amplification provides higher efficiency and output, as well as improved noise and distortion measurements, compared with more traditional Class AB designs. However, many Class D designs in the past have suffered in sound quality, due to limitations in the digital circuitry. HiFi Rose's state-of-the-art Class AD amplifier resolves these problems with the use of innovative new materials. The RA180's Class AD amplifier boasts Gallium Nitride FETs as opposed to more common Silicon FET tech. The result is a high speed, perfectly accurate amplification stage with almost no dead time, allowing it to perform far more naturally, like a pure analogue amplifier."

The RA180 boasts two 200W amplifier modules per channel. One amp is optimised for stable mid/bass and balance, the other is designed with the intention of delivering clean power to the high frequencies: "spanning up into the super tweeter area well beyond 20kHz". To help control the high frequencies, the RA180 is equipped with a user adjustable active crossover. The H/F crossover section allows users to set the base high-frequency output from 600Hz to 6,000Hz for a perfect matching of the connected speakers. The high-frequency amplifier module will then support playback up-to 100kHz (at -3dB) to help shape: "a wide and deep soundstage". The two amplifier modules per channel can also be set to Bridge Tied Loads (BTL) mode, allowing for a single pair of speaker cables to connect to each speaker while still benefiting from 400W of balanced sound.

Other customisable features include Bass and Treble tone controls allowing users to adjust the flat frequency response at 100Hz and 10kHz, respectively, with ±15dB gain for a fully tailored sound. There's also an adjustable balance control slider to set the signal split between both channels. Alternatively, the Bypass Power Amp mode links the source connected to the Line 3 input directly to the power amplifier stage without going through the preamplifier.

The built-in MM and MC-compatible phono stage is equipped with low-band bass turnover and high-band roll off selection dials to tailor the amplifier to suit the EQ filter that each vinyl record was originally produced with and the RA180 features one balanced and three unbalanced inputs alongside the built-in phono stage. There's also support for a subwoofer output, a trigger connection and two grounding points alongside the 16 speaker output terminals, which support the connection of two different sets of stereo speakers.

The RA180's power supply employs Silicon Carbide FET technology, with its high voltage support and heat resistance, intended to provide a high output in an efficient manner with low heat generation. It also responds to power delivery fluctuations with its 2.5kW class PFC circuit, oversized capacitors and damping factor above 200. "The result", says the company: "is a power supply that responds to the needs of the system, while always allowing the amplifier to sound as clean and natural as possible".

The RA180 measures 430 x 110 x 350mm (WxHxD) and includes a remote control and wi-fi control (via RoseAmpConnect app).

# AUTOMAT

# FOR THE PEOPLE

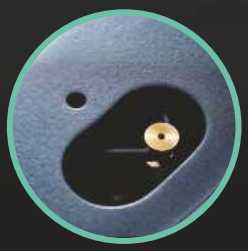
hi-finews HIGHLY COMMENDED

April 2022

Pro-Ject AUDIO SYSTEMS **A1**

## FULLY AUTOMATIC TURNTABLE

The A1 turntable combines Pro-Ject's philosophy for toe-tapping Hi-Fi sound with the ultimate convenience of a fully automatic drive system. Featuring true audiophile design elements throughout its sleek, minimalist construction, it's ready to play straight out of the box. Simply set your speed, hit start, and let A1, take care of the rest.



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# Float on!

## New isolation solutions for speakers

**PRICE:** £122-£600 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
**WEB:** CONNECTED-FIDELITY.COM

**CONNECTED FIDELITY IS** launching what it claims is a whole new take on component isolation. The company explains: "It's well known that audio and AV components throughout the audio chain, from source to loudspeakers, are adversely affected by external vibrations, as well as by internal vibrations produced by the components themselves. Transformers, transistors, servos and motors all present a range of vibration challenges. Isolation products that feature materials such as rubbers, silicones and springs will dampen certain of these resonances, however this often comes at a cost: the compliant 'memory' of such materials means that they can add their own resonance character. At the same time, these materials tend to act as a 'stopper', and so vibrational energy is reflected back, rather than providing an energy conduit or 'sink' to dissipate that energy."

The Float range is different in that it doesn't use compliant or damping materials, but rather an arrangement of 'floating' spheres held within two circular, cup-shaped channels. Within their rigid, anodised aluminium two-part body resides a bespoke ball race manufactured from chromium steel, in which a non-resonant material 'cage' holds the balls apart. Three POM spheres set into the top and bottom faces of each puck to act as 'feet' to ensure stability. The Float is designed to ensure that vibrational energy is 'spent' in the micro-movements of these spheres without losing a direct connection path between the component and the surface on which it is placed.

### Good vibrations

Optional 'coasters' (one of which is supplied as standard with each unit) can be incorporated above or below each Float puck. For use with loudspeakers up to 30kg, a set of speaker connectors is offered with threaded fixing options (M6 and M8). For loudspeakers over 30kg, a dedicated Float set, including all components and connectors, features chrome steel balls in place of the POM spheres in a bid to ensure no deformation over time under a heavy load.

Available in a choice of black or silver finishes, Float isolation is supplied in sets of three and four, with additional coaster sets also available. Prices are as follows: set of three pucks (including three coasters) £350. Set of four pucks (including four coasters) £400. Additional coasters (set of three) £122. Set of four £150. Loudspeaker connectors (for use with pucks, for loudspeakers up to 30kg) – set of four M6 connectors £200. Set of four M8 connectors £200. Loudspeaker set (complete set, for loudspeakers over 30kg) – set of four (pucks, coasters and M6 connectors) £600. Set of four (pucks, coasters and M8 connectors) £600.

# Bono appétit

## The U2 Mini digital transport debuts Lumin's all-new processing system

**PRICE:** £1,900 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** LUMINMUSIC.COM SOUNDDESIGNDISTRIBUTION.CO.UK

**SOUND DESIGN DISTRIBUTION** is bringing Lumin's new U2 Mini digital transport to the UK. Building on its predecessor – the Lumin U1 Mini – the new design includes completely new processing hardware and software, which the company claims will: "deliver heightened resampling flexibility while retaining all the musicality for which Lumin is celebrated".

Features include faster processing for network playback up to DSD512 and 768kHz, 16–32-bit stereo and MQA Decoding, with sampling in both directions from 44.1kHz to 384kHz/DSD256. Key hardware features carried over from the U1 Mini include Lumin's advanced quad clocking system and five digital outputs: USB (now capable of native DSD512 support), AES EBU, coaxial BNC, coaxial RCA and optical.

Supported audio file formats include DSD Lossless, PCM Lossless: FLAC, Apple Lossless (ALAC), WAV and AIFF; MP3, AAC and MQA, while the Roon Ready U2 Mini is also compatible with Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect, Qobuz, FLAC, Lossless Radio, TuneIn Radio and AirPlay. Playback is gapless.

The Lumin control app includes native support for Tidal, MQA, Qobuz and TuneIn Radio, as well as volume control, high-resolution artwork, automatic internet links to artists/album/songs and the saving and restoring of playlists (including Tidal and Qobuz).

Finished in a new surfacing process taken from Lumin's high-end P1 audio hub, the U2 Mini comes in natural or black anodised aluminium and includes a Leedh lossless digital volume control and is compatible with the Lumin Infrared Control Package.

# French connection

## New multi-room upgrade from across the channel lets listeners have a ball

**PRICE:** £900 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
**WEB:** EN.ELIPSON.COM AVOKE.CO.UK

**FRENCH COMPANY ELIPSON** has launched the W35+, an updated version of its W35 connected, multi-room stereo speaker. With improved sound quality and connectivity now integrated into the spherical design, the W35+ boasts a redesign of the integration of the silk-dome tweeters – which the company claims makes improvements in sound quality: "The 2x 165mm mid/bass drive units perform in partnership with these reworked tweeter housings to give better treble and greatly improved harmonics. Maintaining the original design of woofer and tweeter on each side of the speaker gives a truly stereophonic configuration from a single unit."

Amplification remains Elipson's Class D that provides up to 350W RMS, while new to the W35+ and built into the housing, is an RJ45 socket for connected streaming along with optical and 3.5mm mini-jack AUX inputs.

Wireless connectivity comes via aptX HD Bluetooth for playing hi-res music files (up to 24-bit) and wi-fi (hi-res in Solo mode or CD quality in multi-room mode).

Operation is via the Elipson Connect App, which makes the W35+ compatible with other Elipson Connected products such as the Music Centre Connect HD (*HFC* 482), Connect Wi-Fi receiver and Connect streaming amp, all of which can be located in other rooms to create a multi-room system.

A 350mm sphere and weighing in at 7.6kg, the W35+ comes in Matt Dark Grey and a specially designed tripod stand is available in either Silver Oak or Walnut at an additional £149.

# Wireless Fidelity
## Has a New Champion

The Expert Imaging & Sound Association of as many as sixty specialist magazines from around the world has honoured System Audio with its Best Wireless Speaker Award two years running! Located at Roskilde, the music city of Denmark, System Audio has received more than 150 awards for sound, design and innovation since 1984.

EISA AWARD Best Product 2021-2022
WIRELESS FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS
System Audio Legend 40.2 Silverback

EISA AWARD Best Product 2020-2021
WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKER
System Audio legend 5 silverback

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# Here's to Blue

New "game-changer" in multi-room audio

**PRICE:** £350 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** BLUESOUND.COM

**CANADIAN COMPANY BLUESOUND** is launching the HUB, which it describes as: "a game-changing network accessory that connects to a variety of analogue and digital audio sources, bringing them into the Bluesound ecosystem for multi-room streaming". Effectively claiming to make any source capable of multi-room playback, Bluesound says: "add a Bluesound HUB to any non-BluOS-enabled audio source and transmit music to one or many Bluesound players around the home. Audio sources like a turntable or CD player instantly become network-connected and are new sources from which your Bluesound system can play music. The HUB unlocks the problem of geography in letting users stream vinyl wirelessly for the first time."

## Well connected

The HUB boasts "a host" of inputs on the back panel including HDMI eARC, coaxial, optical, stereo RCAs and a moving-magnet phono stage. Each HUB manages a single source and up to four HUBs can be added to a single network.

Equipped with BluOS, the HUB uses the BluOS Controller app setup wizard to add audio sources. The company explains: "A few taps on the familiar BluOS app controls a whole multi-room system from a smartphone, tablet or computer". It is also possible to play one analogue and one digital stream simultaneously to different Bluesound or BluOS players around the house.

Boasting an external USB-C connected power supply, the HUB can be placed on shelves, behind TVs or mounted with four different orientation options using two keyhole mounting slots.

The HUB is 143 x 45 x 153mm (WxHxD), weighs 0.63kg and comes in a black finish.

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Primare is known for the elegant exterior design of its products, which reflects the artfully crafted electrical designs based on our practical design approach allowing every component to work sympathetically together as a cohesive whole.

Power supply designs are custom crafted to best serve the unique needs of each component, whether it be switching or linear, based on toroidal or laminated core transformers, so that all elements of any design operate effortlessly.

Signal paths are kept as short and as simple as possible, with gain preferably in one device, and utilizing four-layer circuit boards to more easily and effectively design circuitry with the most direct connection of components to reduce distortion and eliminate noise.

Non-essential signal carrying wires are eliminated, exemplified by the use of surface mount components when possible and by directly connecting the output stage to the speaker binding posts free of wires or solder to interfere with power delivery.

**▶ For more details, go to Primare.net**

karma audio-visual

Authorized United Kingdom Distributor

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# Our Latest Work Of Art

## The NEW **3510** Series

Our new 3510 Series Integrated Amplifier is a masterclass in musicality and power. With 110w RMS, six line inputs and the option to fit a MC or MM phono module or even a plug in DAC, it redefines what is possible in one box amplification. To find out more about our exciting new 3510 Series which also includes a pre-amp as well as power amplifiers, visit **exposurehifi.com** today.

exposure

# Over the Moon

## 'Hovering' speaker imports from Canada

**PRICE:** £2,650 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
**WEB:** MOON-AUDIO.COM RENAISSANCEAUDIO.CO.UK

**CANADIAN COMPANY MOON** is introducing its Voice 22 speakers to the UK via Renaissance Audio. Billed as: "a true partner" for Moon amplifiers which: "will also bring out the best from other audio manufacturers' systems", the Voice 22 features a 29mm soft dome tweeter with waveguide and 155mm mineral-filled polypropylene cone mid/bass driver.

The speaker also features a unique 'Hover Base', which the company describes as making it appear to: "gracefully float above the surface on which it is positioned and ensures that it can be placed on virtually any furniture without leaving a mark, while adding stability to the loudspeaker and guaranteeing sound integrity".

And should your chosen listening environment require the speakers to be placed on stands, the Hover Base can be removed and the cabinet fitted to the custom-made Stand 22, which is crafted from powder-coated stainless steel and has a matt black finish.

The Voice 22 speakers are available in a choice of either black or white piano gloss finishes with matching magnetic cloth grilles. They measure 200 x 350 x 290mm (WxHxD) and weigh 10.5kg. As a special promotion to mark their launch, Renaissance is offering a pair of Voice 22s with an ACE music system for £5,700, an overall saving of £450. This offer runs in the UK and Ireland only until 31 July. The custom stands will set you back an extra £495 per pair.

# Seventh Heaven

## New speaker from Denmark

**PRICE:** £4,950 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** AUDIOVECTOR.COM RENAISSANCEAUDIO.CO.UK

**AUDIOVECTOR UNVEILED ITS** new QR 7 loudspeaker at the recent High End Show in Munich. The QR 7 is the flagship model of the QR series and was developed, engineered and handmade in Denmark featuring two air-shifting 203mm drivers and a newly developed crossover that the company claims: "combine to create a hyper-dynamic, yet neutral-sounding speaker with a big, open soundstage".

The QR7 is a full three-way system and has double Pure Piston bass units with sandwich membranes, a 152mm midrange and the Audiovector Air Motion Transformer tweeter. Its impedance load is 90.5dB, which Audiovector says means it's easily driven – "a perfect match for both solid state and tube amplifiers…The combination of low-hysteresis voice coil technology, large powerful magnets, rigid turbulence-suppressing baskets and sandwich membranes made from two layers of aluminium, allows Audiovector to create a richer, clearer and more vibrant sound."

The QR 7's enclosure is made from high-density hardwood HDF aiming for: "superior strength, low resonance and elegant aesthetics". The tweeter's fascia plates are machined from a single piece of aerospace-grade aluminium; precision machined, glass blasted, brushed and then anodised in a tungsten titanium grey colour. The rose gold-plated dispersion mesh works as an S-Stop filter with a view to improving driver integration.

The QR7 is available to buy in the UK via Renaissance, measures 250 x 1,140 x 400mm (WxHxD), weighs 36.2kg and comes in White Silk, Dark Walnut and Black Piano.

Tickets On Sale Now!

www.hifishowlive.com

# THE UK hi-fi SHOW Live

## The ultimate high-end hi-fi experience

**10th-11th September**

**Tickets are now on sale for the UK's premier high-end audio event – the UK Hi-Fi Show *Live*, hosted at the Ascot Racecourse Grandstand, High Street, Ascot on Saturday 10th and Sunday 11th September. Tickets are £20 per day or £30 for a weekend pass via *www.eventbrite.co.uk* or via the link on the *www.hifishowlive.com* website. Subscribers to *Hi-Fi Choice* (and *Hi-Fi News*) are offered concessionary £15 day passes, details will be on the insert included with future subscriber copies. The UK Hi-Fi Show *Live* was last hosted in 2019, before the COVID lockdowns, so its return this year is highly anticipated.**

Last hosted at the prestigious Ascot Grandstand in 2019, the UK's dedicated high-end audio event returns with the 'who's who' of world-class hi-fi and audio presentations

**SHOW ORGANISER, EDITORIAL** Director of AVTech Media, *Hi-Fi News* editor and President of EISA, Paul Miller commented on the Show's success in 2019: "Moving from the traditional hotel-based environment to the stunning architecture of the Ascot Grandstand gave us all the opportunity to raise our game with bigger rooms, superior acoustic isolation and a dedicated AC supply. Clearly inspired by this venue, our exhibitors created a series of compelling displays and demos, featuring not only the best audio equipment but also fronted by the most experienced designers and brand ambassadors in the business.

"For 2022 we are returning with more audio thrills, more hi-fi seminars and workshops by the high-end's leading marques and international journalists. We have also significantly upgraded our food and beverage offering with hot and cold selections, fast food and hot drinks available from multiple franchises, plus sit-down meals in the Horseshoe Restaurant and a bar open all day. With three months to go, this prestige audio and luxury lifestyle experience has become the UK event for leading audio brands to be seen and heard!"

Companies attending include the revitalised Lowther Loudspeakers with updated classics like the TP2 corner horns, an update of the famous TP1s (top right). Henley Audio will be demoing a series of new products from the likes of Hi-Fi Rose, Cabasse (inset picture), Klipsch, Musical Fidelity, Synthesis and Pro-Ject. Boyer Audio will be showing its Kroma Audio speakers and Engström tube amplifiers, with cabling and power conditioning from Shunyata Research and equipment support from FalkenOhr.

Meanwhile, inside the 2nd floor's Parade Ring suite, Padood will be debut-showing SME's flagship Model 60 turntable (centre right) and the cost-no-object Siltech Symphony loudspeaker system. SCV Distribution has a new flagship speaker from Triangle alongside innovative electronics from Benchmark, SPL and Bricasti, while Melco will be demoing its two-box flagship N10/2 music library and S100 network switch. Once again, the luxurious On5 suite on the Grandstand's 5th floor is home to Absolute Sounds and its cream of high-end hi-fi – come hear and drool over the very best from Audio Research, Wilson Audio, D'Agostino (bottom right), Magico, dCS, Constellation, TechDAS and so much more!

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**
Aurender N200

**ORIGIN**
South Korea

**TYPE**
Network-enabled media storage device/streamer

**WEIGHT**
9kg

**DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
330 x 96 x 355mm

**FEATURES**
- 240GB SSD for caching playback
- Two slots for 2.5in HDD or SSDs
- Outputs: coaxial; USB-A 2.0
- Inputs: Ethernet; 2x USB-A 3.0

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Padood Ltd, UK

**WEBSITE**
aurender.com
padood.com

# All's well that ends well

In its basic form this digital streamer/network bridge is governed by the Conductor app, but add optional SSD storage and the N200 turns into an excellent fully fledged music library

Music storage: it can be a thorny subject, not least because those network products offering internal capacity for your library tend either to have fixed, non-expandable storage or offer the option of dealer-installed drives. The cost of such storage is usually high, too – okay, not 'adding capacity at time of ordering your new Apple computer high', where an extra Terabyte can cost you £400, but still at prices to have you looking at HDDs on the likes of Amazon and scratching your head in bewilderment.

Not so with the Aurender N200, available in silver or black at £6,700. As supplied it has no storage capacity aside from the 240GB NVMe SSD used for caching music for playback, of which more later. Instead, two slots on the rear take 2.5in HDDs or SSDs, installed by the user to suit their needs. And that's a good thing for two reasons: one is that you can buy your own drives at sensible prices – think just over £100 for a 1TB Samsung SSD, less if you go for the likes of a Seagate Barracuda HDD – and the other is that Aurender has made it simple to install the storage.

In fact, armed with a Samsung SSD, we are so surprised with the speed and ease of installation that we decide to take it out again and time the process at less than a minute to fit it once more. Switch off the N200, undo two thumbscrews on the rear panel, slide out the tray, drop in the drive – the N200 will take any 2.5in storage up to 7mm thick – then slide the tray in and do up the screws. Power up again and job done – the N200 will format the storage if required, and you're good to play. No tools, no fiddling with tiny screws you'll inevitably drop – that's all there is to it. Easy peasy.

## Refined design

Clearly the Korean designers of this music streamer/server have got things thoroughly thought through, and in the N200 they've further refined a design found in the £19,000 A30 CD ripper/player/server. The N200 may be half the price of that monster high-end unit, but it gives away little apart from an optical disc-drive. Its design and audio capability have been substantially revised for this relatively compact model, from the mainboard processor to the PSU, which even has its own uninterruptible super capacitor provision – allowing an orderly shutdown in case the mains fails. However, Aurender's N200 isn't quite the complete one-stop shop. For a start it has no built-in digital-to-analogue conversion, and so needs to be hooked up with either a suitable DAC – it has outputs on USB and coaxial S/PDIF – or an amp/preamp with onboard conversion. And while it comes with a simple quartet of front-panel controls, operation via the Aurender Conductor app is much slicker and also makes over-air firmware updates a breeze.

At the heart of the N200 is a new low-power Intel quad-core processor, low-noise linear power supply and increased system memory for smoother operation. The rear-panel Ethernet connection, adjacent to two further USB ports to which external storage can be added, is double-isolated to keep network noise at bay, and the whole thing is poured into a high-quality machined aluminium housing with a large, clear display.

Aurender's player is built around the principle of caching music on its way

to the output, using that 240GB internal SSD to avoid any glitches or drop-outs whether playing from (your) internal hard-drives, external USB storage or online services such as Qobuz and Tidal, both of which are supported here. In fact, once music is summoned from internal or external drives to the cache, the 'supplying' drive is idled to optimise performance.

We've already mentioned that the N200's linear PSU is backed up by a super capacitor UPS to cover any mains failures. Having had more than one device of this kind 'bricked' by a power outage in the past, that seems like a sensible provision, along with the gentle shutdown procedure the unit executes when turning it off. This is, after all, a computer at heart.

## Installing a Samsung SSD is so quick and simple it takes less than a minute to fit

You could, of course, use the N200 simply as a means of accessing streaming services, where it sounds very good indeed, even if £6,700 is quite a lot of expense just to listen to your playlists on Qobuz or Tidal (for which MQA decoding is available as an extra-cost download add-on).

However, like all its products, the N200 isn't Roon-compatible, Aurender saying that: "Roon is a very CPU-demanding piece of software, and our servers are intentionally designed to be minimalistic where processing is concerned". The company believes this is: "a big reason why your Aurender sounds so good", adding its own playback software is custom engineered and tailored to its hardware. You can, however, 'cast' to the player from a Roon installation, though this is via AirPlay and so really only designed for casual listening.

**HOW IT COMPARES**

**Aurender Inc and Melco are largely responsible for establishing the 'NAS niche' for audiophiles. Digital output-only music libraries now include the £1,500 Roon Nucleus+ (*HFC* 439), the £4,600 Auralic Aries G2.1 (*HFC* 469), plus the very high-end £9,495 MU1 from Grimm Audio. Two-box solutions with specialised outboard PSUs include the £9,000 N10/2-S38 (*HFC* 488) from Melco and £11,400 Statement from Innuos. These audio-specific storage/server solutions are worth investigating if you've already invested in a top-flight USB or S/PDIF-connected outboard DAC.**

**Cover artwork is beautifully displayed on the full-colour 6.9in (1,280 x 480-pixel) screen**

The intention here is that you use the N200's optional internal storage capacity to house your complete music library. A couple of 2TB drives should give you plenty of space for 15,000+ albums in CD-quality FLAC, or almost 2,000 in 24-bit/192kHz, and they can be loaded to those drives by simple copying from USB storage. Alternatively you can access the N200 over a local network and drag content to it from your NAS library – this can be slow, but works in the background while you listen.

Otherwise, there is a no-fuss 'copy from NAS' routine built into the player, but this is designed to transfer an entire library, and some 30TB of music isn't about to go onto the smaller-capacity drives we have installed in the N200!

Trying a number of DACs we have to hand with the N200, we finally settle on iFi Audio's Neo iDSD (*HFC* 482) as the 'bridge' between its USB output and our Naim amplification.

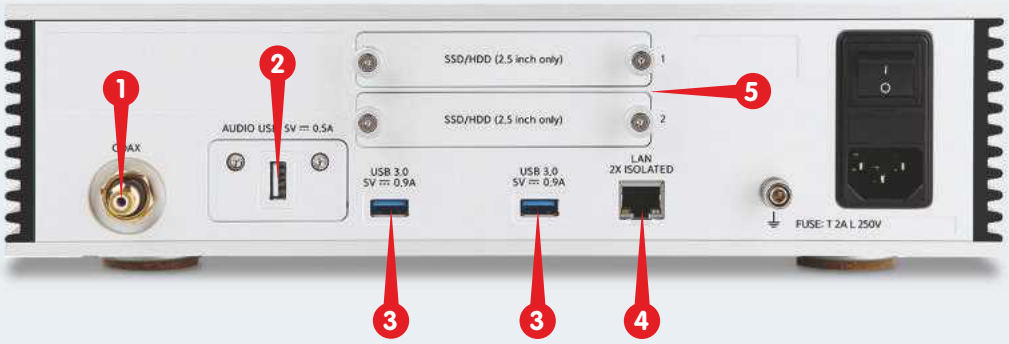
As with the drive installation, setup is fast and simple, and with music playing in very short order it's soon clear that Aurender's approach to network player design is paying off.

## Sound quality

It certainly makes iFi Audio's classy little DAC work to the best of its considerable abilities, even when streaming hi-res content from Qobuz. Pink Floyd's *Hey Hey Rise Up* single, in 24-bit/96kHz, is superbly presented with a deep, dramatic opening that gives way to Nick Mason's powerful drumming and Dave Gilmour's soaring, soulful guitar.

With that single track we're almost convinced by the viability of streaming as a music source, the N200's handling levelling the playing field between this method and the download we'd previously purchased. Mind you, it also puts on a rewarding show with a BBC Radio live concert recording in 320kbps/m4a, delivering ▶

**CONNECTIONS**




1. 24-bit/192kHz coaxial output
2. 32-bit/384kHz/ DSD512 USB-A output
3. USB-A 3.0 ports for external hard drives
4. Isolated Gigabit Ethernet port
5. Two bays for user-installed 2.5in SSD or HDDs

Cabasse

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

April 2022

Discover

# THE PEARL AKOYA

## ALL ROUND PERFORMANCE...

The Pearl Akoya is a coaxial wireless speaker that is a direct descendant of the high-resolution streaming speaker, The Pearl. The Pearl Akoya is both a jewel in terms of design and technology due to its compactness, tri-coaxial design and specific bass loud-speaker. Created and developed in Brittany in Northern France, The Pearl Akoya offers exceptional acoustic quality and power that is comparable to a classical orchestra, all from a small package.

HENLEY AUDIO

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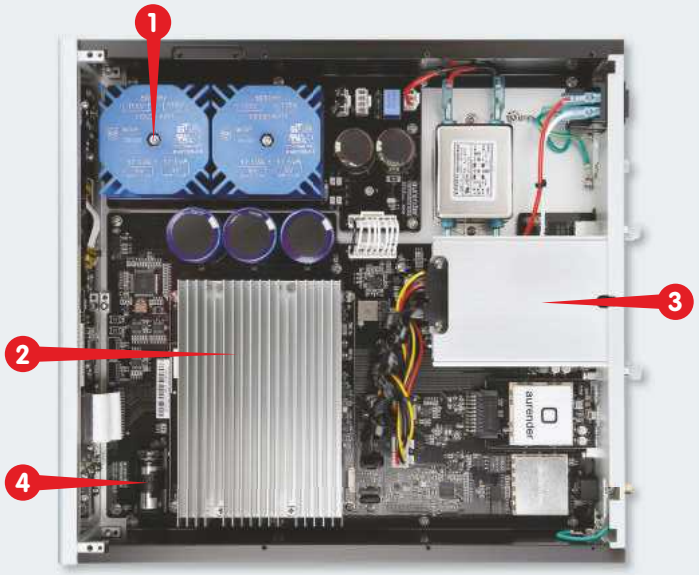
## IN SIGHT




1. Multiple linear PSUs with separate feeds for the main CPU and digital audio processing
2. Intel Quad Core-CPU (under heatsink) with 240GB NVMe cache for music playback
3. Optional SSD/HDD storage
4. Super capacitor serves as a UPS

### TAKING CONTROL

The way to control the N200 is using the free Aurender Conductor app running on an iPad or Android device – the 'lite' version for iPhone is less satisfactory, but the full version will give you complete control over the unit, from streaming your favourite subscription services to organising a library stored on (optional) internal drives. Making use of that SSD/HDD option is the slickest way to do things, as is setting your music up in playlists, but be careful not to use the 'Consume' mode if you want to revisit your selections, as this will delete tracks from the playlists – not your storage! – as they're played. Once setup, with all copying handled via the Conductor interface, the app makes the N200 a breeze to use, the unit even updating automatically as new music is added. Cover artwork is displayed clearly and can be zoomed up to fullscreen if required; multiple playlists can be saved; and it's almost impossible to get lost in the app, however hard you may try. Plus as a final hint, go into the settings and enable the Critical Listening Mode: this kills the unit's front-panel display and background functions, saving resources for optimal sound quality.

the dynamics and detail in splendid fashion, and giving a real sense of the concert hall ambience in the first part of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*.

But enough not-so-casual listening during setup and familiarisation: with the piano and electronica of the splendid soundtrack from John Carpenter's *The Fog,* the N200 makes those deep chords and ambient effects chilling and ominous, with a real sense of menace.

The same holds true for the live version of Nick Cave's *Where The Wild Roses Grow* from Kylie Minogue's *The Abbey Road Sessions* set, made all the more disturbing by the simple accompaniment and the contrast between Minogue's sweet voice and Cave's sonorous growl. Mind you, on this album Minogue can even tingle with her slow-burn, string-accompanied take on her big pop chart banger *I Should Be So Lucky* when played through this system!

Just as powerful is Mitsuko Uchida's recording of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* in which the N200's acute delivery reveals even the slightest touch of finger on key as well as the overall complexities and intricacies of the writing. Meanwhile, the speed and definition of the sound here – even in the complexity of the *Variation 33* fugue, with notes tumbling over each other – is truly quite breathtaking.

This characteristic is also readily apparent in another fugue, the massive piece concluding Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide To The Orchestra* in the Michael Stern/Kansas City Symphony Britten's Orchestra recording. This is one of our habitual go-to pieces for review testing and remains hugely enjoyable even on repeated listening.

Through the Aurender/iFi Audio combination the instruments sound wonderfully well shaped, and the drama of the crashing finale is of a quality likely to have you cranking the volume up so that you can listen to it all over again.

**Hey Hey Rise Up is superbly presented with a deep and dramatic opening**

## Conclusion

That combination of speed and full-fat sound also serves well a wide range of different music, from the exuberant jazz of the McCoy Tyner/Freddie Hubbard Quartet on their *Live At Fabrik Hamburg 1986* set to the full-on blast of The Red Hot Chilli Peppers' *The Heavy Wing* from their 12th and latest LP, *Unlimited Love*. Whatever type of music floats your boat, the marvellously minimal time you'll need to spend getting used to the way Aurender's N200 goes about things will no doubt be very richly rewarded indeed ●

**Four buttons for menu and playback are on the right, but the app controls the N200 better**

### Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★½
OVERALL ★★★★½

**LIKE:** User-defined hard drive

**DISLIKE:** Nothing of note

**WE SAY:** A highly attractive prospect, a real can-do-er

# How we test

*Hi-Fi Choice* employs the most methodical test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

# Unique group tests

Our *Group Tests* are supported by rigorous and exhaustive listening tests carried out by experts

## EARBUDS GROUP TEST

**MOST OF THE** earbuds in this group rely purely on Bluetooth for streaming audio, with only the Astell&Kern AK Zero1 opting for a wired connection. However, Bluetooth comes in different flavours that may be better suited to devices from particular manufacturers. Most here support AAC, which is Apple's preferred codec for Bluetooth audio, so these will work well with all Apple devices, including the iPad that I use for listening to Tidal, with its MQA audio format. However, Audio-Technica's ATH-CKS50TW supports both AAC and the aptX codec that is widely used by Android devices, so this requires the use of an additional MPow Bluetooth transmitter to provide aptX output for my Apple devices. Astell&Kern's AK Zero1 opts for a purely wired connection. However, the analogue audio output from many smartphones and mobile devices is highly variable, so we pair it with A&K's own portable USB Dual-DAC. That might seem to give the AK Zero1 an unfair advantage, but it's a perfectly viable option for any set of wired headphones or earbuds, and it's up to individual users to decide whether they prefer to prioritise convenience or sound quality.

To test noise-cancellation features we also employ a number of test files from MyNoise.net and Soundsnap.com, which simulate the noise of an airline cabin in flight and the general hubbub of a busy airport.

## TEST MUSIC

**DAMIEN RICE**
*The Blower's Daughter*
*O*

**JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON**
*Flight From The City*
*Orphée*

**KATE BUSH**
*The Big Sky (Meteorological Mix)*
*Hounds Of Love*

**MAX RICHTER**
*The Waves*
*Three Worlds*

## REFERENCE SYSTEM

**PORTABLE DAC:**
**Astell&Kern USB-C Dual DAC £130**

You don't have to own A&K's AK Zero1 earbuds to make good use of its portable DAC. The Dual DAC is a really lightweight travelling companion for any set of wired earbuds. As the name implies, it manages to squeeze in two Cirrus CS43198 DACs to handle the left/right channels and provide a serious amp boost.

**STREAMING SERVICE:**
**Tidal From £9.99/month *HFC* 487**

Tidal has a lot more competition now that Apple and Amazon are offering hi-res audio at no extra cost. However, Tidal's ace-in-the-hole is still its top-tier HiFi+ (£19.99) service, which offers millions of tracks in 'studio quality' MQA Master format. And, as well as supporting iOS and Android mobile devices, Tidal also offers a really useful desktop app for Macs and Windows.

**DIGITAL AUDIO PLAYER:**
**Astell&Kern A&norma SR25 MKII £700 *HFC* 489**

A&K's latest entry-level player covers all the bases for most types of headphones and mobile audio. It has a built-in DAC that provides hi-res audio output – up to 32-bit/384KHz – for wired headphones and it supports both aptX and LDAC to provide high-quality Bluetooth audio too.

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# Grouptest

**EARBUDS** £140-£650

# Darling buds

There's an ever increasing range of wireless – and wired – earbuds for going out and about this summer. ***Cliff Joseph*** slips on his shades and road tests them

**LOVE THEM OR** loathe them, earbuds have been the defining trend in headphone technology in recent years, ever since Apple launched its first AirPods just a little over five years ago, back in December 2016. The success of the AirPods kick started an entirely new category of wireless in-ears that other manufacturers soon rushed to imitate. However, Apple's success had more to do with fashion and design than anything else, allowing rival manufacturers to get a foot in the door by offering more advanced audio technologies, such as aptX, which aims to provide discerning listeners with something close to 'hi-res audio' via Bluetooth. Apple's rivals can also compete when it comes to providing better battery life or a snug, firm fit that is more practical for exercise and outdoor use.

Our focus here is on affordable earbuds, mainly in the £140-£650 price range, and the majority of options at this level tend to rely on Bluetooth to provide convenient, wireless audio. However, there are still many audiophiles who prefer wired in-ears that can provide true hi-res audio without the compromises of Bluetooth, and one of the most impressive wired options we've seen in recent months is Astell&Kern's AK Zero1. The triple-driver design of the AK Zero1 doesn't come cheap – even without digital features such as Bluetooth and noise cancellation, it hits the upper limit in our price range – but it shows that earbuds can still provide strong audio quality for music lovers who prefer to focus on the music, rather than the technology. ▶

## ON TEST

**Apple**
**AirPods Pro £240** p36
Very much designed for owners of Apple products, the AirPods Pro is crammed with high-tech features, although its reliance on the AAC codec means that it's less friendly towards non-Apple audio sources.

**Astell&Kern**
**AK Zero1 £650** p38
The only set of earbuds in this group to eschew Bluetooth in favour of wired connectivity also happens to be the most expensive, but the Zero1 spends every penny on its hybrid design that uses three drivers to produce impressive sound quality.

**Audio-Technica**
**ATH-CKS50TW**
**£150** p40
The chunky design may not suit everyone, but this highly affordable set of earbuds provides good sound quality and an impressive range of features, including support for aptX Adaptive and long-lasting battery life.

**Denon**
**AH-C830NCW**
**£140** p42
The low price means that Denon's earbuds take a rather no-frills approach, but AAC support, good sound quality and noise cancellation provide an affordable alternative to the expensive AirPods for Apple users.

**Klipsch**
**T5 II ANC £300** p44
Klipsch takes on Apple when it comes to high-tech features, with its updated T5 II ANC offering Dirac HD Sound optimisation and 'Bragi' technology that cunningly uses the movement of your head to control the earbuds.

**Technics**
**EAH-AZ60 £200** p47
Despite its modest price, Technics EAH-AZ60 is a good all-rounder. With a comfortable design, support for AAC and LDAC, and versatile noise-cancellation features for travellers, it has plenty going for it – but will it be enough to take the crown?

# Apple AirPods Pro £240

## Apple's AirPods set the pace, with a combination of striking design and high-tech features

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**
Apple AirPods Pro

**ORIGIN**
USA/Vietnam

**TYPE**
Bluetooth earbuds

**WEIGHT**
5.4g each (buds)
45.6g (case)

**FEATURES**
- Bluetooth with AAC
- Active noise cancellation
- IPX4 water resistant

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Apple UK

At first glance, the £240 AirPods Pro looks very similar to the standard version of the AirPods (£170), with the distinctive little stalk that dangles out of the ear so oddly. However, the AirPods Pro updates that design in a number of ways, introducing active noise cancellation into the range for the first time, and opting for snugly fitting silicon ear-tips rather than the looser, one-size-fits-all approach of its predecessor.

And, of course, the AirPods Pro is still packed with the high-tech features that put the first AirPods on the map. Simply open the little white charging case and the earbuds will automatically pair with any nearby Apple device that has Bluetooth turned on. Internal sensors allow the AirPods Pro to automatically pause music when you remove the earbuds from your ears and to track the movement of your head when watching video so that the sound always seems to come from your screen. As mentioned, the AirPods Pro support active noise cancellation, with a transparency mode that allows you to let some background noise in should you need to hear someone talking to you. The earbuds are rated IPX4 for water resistance, with three sizes of ear-tips included to provide a firm, snug fit, so the AirPods Pro is definitely better suited to exercise and outdoor use than previous models.

### Sound quality

But, while the AirPods Pro is a great companion for Apple devices, it doesn't play so well with others. Like all Apple headphones, the AirPods Pro still relies on Apple's ageing AAC codec for Bluetooth audio, ignoring the aptX option that is used by millions of Android devices. It is possible to use the AirPods with Android devices, but there's no Android app provided by Apple so it's clear where its priorities lie. Battery life is relatively modest at around 4.5 hours when using noise cancelling, although the charging case lets you top up the battery for a total of 24 hours of listening time.

The AirPods Pro seems to be at its best with pop and rock music. The didgeridoo that opens Kate Bush's *The Big Sky (Meteorological Mix)* has a resonant, woody tone to it, and the dense layers of percussion are clear and well balanced. I'm always drawn to the song's slap bass and the AirPods Pro really get into a groove here, landing the bass with an audible snap as the strings hit the frets. The final section of the song really piles up a wall of sound, with chanting harmonies and yet more percussion, but the AirPods Pro manages to hold its balance, keeping even the light tapping of the tambourine in sight as the avalanche of drums piles up all around.

It handles the more delicate sound of Damien Rice's *The Blower's Daughter* well too, effortlessly capturing the wistful melancholy of Rice's voice and the mournful longing of the accompanying cello. The noise-cancellation features work well on this delicate track, effectively blocking the deep rumble of our cabin-noise test files, and even the voice and higher frequencies that other earbuds sometimes struggle to completely shut out.

**The AirPods Pro seems to be at its best with pop and rock music**

If there's a weakness, it's that the sound sometimes feels a little static. The swirling mass of the sea and the floating electronic chimes that open Max Richter's *The Waves* are clear and precise, but the soundstage doesn't feel open or dynamic enough to really immerse you in a convincing atmosphere. That's particularly noticeable in the final movement, where the slowly building strings feel a little too constrained and rather struggle to capture the sheer drama of the piece ●

**HI-FI Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★½☆
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★★☆

**LIKE:** Effective noise cancellation; simple pairing with other Apple devices

**DISLIKE:** Limited soundstage; no aptX

**WE SAY:** Impressive design, but it only works its best with Apple devices

**OVERALL** ★★★★☆

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# Astell&Kern AK Zero1 £650

## More hero than zero, A&K's old-school wired buds deliver terrific sound quality

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**
Astell&Kern AK Zero1

**ORIGIN**
South Korea/Japan

**TYPE**
Wired in-ear monitors

**WEIGHT**
35g

**FEATURES**
- Hybrid driver design
- 1.25m braided OFC cable (3.5mm)
- Frequency response: 25Hz-30KHz

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Astell&Kern

As the most expensive earbuds in this group, the AK Zero1 actually offers a relatively limited range of features. That's because it takes a more traditional approach, refusing to be distracted by the latest tech buzzwords and instead choosing to focus on sound quality to the exclusion of all else.

Proclaiming itself to be an in-ear monitor (IEM) rather than a humble earbud, the AK Zero1 is the only wired headphone in this group, with no Bluetooth option for wireless audio and no noise cancellation or other high-tech features. What it does have is a distinctive 'hybrid' design that combines three different types of driver. This includes a specially designed micro-planar driver that handles the higher frequencies, along with a dual balanced armature one for the midrange treble and vocals, and a conventional 5.6mm dynamic driver for the lower frequencies.

Sticking with that traditional approach, the AK Zero1 is equipped with a detachable, silver-coated 1.25m braided OFC cable that uses MMCX connectors for the earbuds and a standard 3.5mm connector for your audio source of choice. There's also a 4.4mm cable available for a rather hefty £119, which can be used with high-end DACs or digital audio players. To be honest, the long, chunky cable is a bit of a handful – especially as you try to wrap it upward and backward over your ears to hold the earbuds in place – so some users might simply prefer to opt for the convenience of Bluetooth earbuds. On the other hand, the wired AK Zero1 won't ever grind to a halt with a flat battery and its sturdy little carrying case will keep it and all six sizes of ear-tips safe when you're out and about on the move.

### Sound quality

The lack of volume controls can be a little annoying when you're on the go, forcing you to keep reaching for your smartphone or mobile device whenever you need to crank it up or turn it down. There's no built-in microphone for voice calls either, which could be a deal-breaker for some smartphone users.

The analogue audio on many mobile devices is what you might kindly describe as 'sub-optimal', but Astell&Kern also makes a terrific little portable DAC that allows the AK Zero1 to put its best foot forward.

The most immediate impression is that the wired AK Zero1 creates a very relaxed, open soundstage, which is well suited to the laid-back atmosphere of *The Blower's Daughter*. There's a full, resonant sound to Damien Rice's acoustic strumming and such a warm, intimate tone to Vyvienne Long's cello that it feels like a live performance in my living room.

That sense of space works on a grander scale too, allowing the swirling sounds of the sea in *The Waves* to wash over me in a way that is both soothing and dramatic at the same time. The electronic chimes cut through the air with a sharp, urgent tone that changes the mood, and the mournful cries of Grace Davidson's soprano hint at tragedy to come. The

**The Zero1's hybrid design combines three different types of driver**

AK Zero1 shows tremendous restraint here, allowing the full orchestra to join in slowly before gradually overpowering Davidson's voice until it is ultimately lost on the waves.

The dramatic sound of the AK Zero1 works well in other genres, too. The conclusion to *The Big Sky* is a riotous delight, as Kate Bush yells: "and we pause… for the jet!" with the pounding drums and bass sounding dense and hard hitting, but always clear and well balanced. Some earbuds give the bass an extra little boost, which some may prefer for dance music or exercise, but the precise, expansive sound of the AK Zero1 is hard to beat at this price ●

**HI-FI Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
FEATURES ★★★½☆

**LIKE:** Precise, balanced tone; expansive soundstage

**DISLIKE:** Lacks Bluetooth, noise cancelling or volume controls

**WE SAY:** Excellent sound quality, but perhaps a little too old-school for some

**OVERALL** ★★★★½

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# Audio-Technica ATH-CKS50TW £150

Hi-Fi Choice GROUPTEST WINNER

## Audio-Technica's affordable earbuds pack a punch with good sound quality and impressive battery life

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**
Audio-Technica ATH-CKS50TW

**ORIGIN**
Japan/Vietnam

**TYPE**
Bluetooth earbuds

**WEIGHT**
8g each (buds)
60g (case)

**FEATURES**
- 9mm drivers
- IPX4 water resistant
- 20-hour battery life
- aptX; aptX Adaptive; AAC

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Audio-Technica

Audio-Technica's ATH-CKS50TW is one of the most affordable earbuds in the group, but it provides a really good combination of useful features and attractive sound quality.

The earbuds are a little on the chunky side, but A-T says they're designed to fit very securely in the ear while you're moving around, and there are four sizes of ear-tips included. I manage to get a good fit, but some users may still prefer earbuds with a more compact design.

However, A-T does at least take the opportunity to cram in plenty of features. The ATH-CKS50TW supports both aptX and aptX Adaptive, along with Apple's AAC, so it'll be suitable for a wide range of computers and mobile devices. It also boasts Sony's 360 spatial audio format and allows you to pair the earbuds with two different audio sources – perhaps using your smartphone while watching a film on your laptop.

Audio-Technica's Connect app works well, providing a five-band equaliser, left/right balance adjustment and a Low Latency mode for watching video or playing games. Noise cancelling includes a 'hear-through' option that lets in some background noise so that you can stay aware of your surroundings, and there's also a 'quick' mode with a button-press that briefly lowers the volume if you need to listen out for something nearby. The only minor problem is that the button controls on the earbuds can be a little fiddly. They can require one, two or three button presses to perform different functions, and I find that they sometimes pause the music (one press) before I am able to press the button again.

### Sound quality

One advantage of the chunky earbud is that it has enough room for a large battery, lasting for an outstanding 15 hours with noise cancelling turned on or 20 hours when it's turned off. The charging case also provides 1.5 additional charges when you're travelling, making the CKS50TW a good companion for long journeys.

The earbuds may be a bit on the big and chunky side, but the CKS50TW certainly has a light touch. There's a relaxed, laid-back feel to *The Blower's Daughter*, with just a hint of reverb on Damien Rice's acoustic guitar to give it the feel of an intimate live performance. The soundstage opens up as he launches into the chorus and the electric guitar joins in, swirling gracefully around. As always, though, it's Vyvienne Long's strings that seal the deal, with the ATH-CKS50TW catching all the longing as the cello lingers in the air for long seconds.

The noise cancellation proves to be particularly effective during this gentle track, blocking out both high and low frequencies very well, so that only a few stray voices intrude into the laid-back atmosphere.

That attractive soundstage also works well on Max Richter's *The Waves* as the sounds of the sea swirl around restlessly and create a great sense of atmosphere. The CKS50TW pinpoints the light electronic chimes with great precision, keeping them in sight as the low murmur of the strings swells beneath, creating a growing sense of unease. It maintains its balance as the rest of the orchestra enters, slowly building up a wall – or rather a wave – of sound that sweeps all before it.

**The battery lasts an impressive 20 hours with noise cancelling turned off**

Finally, for a real wall of sound, Kate Bush's *The Big Sky* piles up layer upon layer of drums and percussion, but the ATH-CKS50TW handles the onslaught well, capturing the steady pace of the bass drum that drives the final section of the song forward. All the other effects remain clear and balanced, though, even the rattle of the tambourine and Bush's joyous whoops as the song slowly rides off into the distance ●

**Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★★☆

**LIKE:** Spacious, well-balanced sound; great battery life

**DISLIKE:** Fiddly controls; chunky earpieces

**WE SAY:** Excellent value for money, with good sound, features and battery life

OVERALL ★★★★½

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# Denon AH-C830NCW £140

The design will be familiar, but low price and good sound provide an affordable alternative for Apple users

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**
Denon AH-C830NCW

**ORIGIN**
Japan/China

**TYPE**
Bluetooth earbuds

**WEIGHT**
5.4g each (buds)
43g (case)

**FEATURES**
- Bluetooth AAC; SBC
- Active noise-cancellation with Transparency Mode
- 11mm x 10mm drivers (oval)
- IPX4 water resistant

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Denon UK

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Denon is paying the AirPods Pro a pretty big compliment. The AH-C830NCW closely resembles the Apple offering, with the ear-tips angled downwards and the little stalks dangling out of the ears. The difference is that the AH-C830NCW is available in both black and white and is a lot cheaper.

There's no app provided so you can't adjust EQ or other settings, but that keeps things simple as you merely need to turn on Bluetooth to pair the earbuds with your device. The Denon supports Apple's AAC, but there's not aptX, so Android users may want to look elsewhere. But, at this price, the AH-C830NCW does well to include active noise cancellation, with a Transparency mode also available that lets some background noise through when required. Noise-cancellation features are easily controlled by tapping the button on the left earbud, while the right one controls music playback. And, as with the AirPods, there's an internal sensor that can automatically play or pause the music when you remove the earbuds or re-insert them.

They weigh just 5.4g each, so they're barely noticeable when you're wearing them. Denon includes three sizes of ear-tips and I have no trouble getting a comfortable fit. The AH-C830NCW is also rated IPX4 for water resistance so it's sturdy enough for outdoor use or working up a bit of a sweat at the gym.

## Sound quality

The low cost does mean a few compromises, however. There's no volume control on the earbuds, which means that you have to keep grabbing your smartphone whenever you need to adjust the volume. Battery life is relatively limited too, at just under five hours when using noise cancellation or six without. Even so, that's still comparable with the more expensive AirPods Pro – and Denon's charging case provides three full charges so that you can top up while on long journeys.

The AH-C830NCW has a precise, clear sound that seems to work particularly well with classical music. It's very effective at capturing the glacial stillness on the piano introduction to *Flight From The City*. Jóhann Jóhannsson's touch on the keyboard is light, but firm and the AH-C830NCW lends a sharp edge to the sound that lets us know this isn't just a cosy lullaby.

It's a well-balanced sound too, capturing the slowly soaring strings and horns of the Deutsches Filmorchester Babelsberg on *The Waves*. The AH-C830NCW remains precise and clear as the entire orchestra builds towards the track's final crescendo. If there's a weakness, it's that – as with the AAC-equipped AirPods – the sound feels a little constrained, lacking the wider soundstage that fully embraces the drama of the piece. That's noticeable, too, on the dense production of *The Big Sky* by Kate Bush. The Denon does a good job of capturing the detail in the dense, multi-tracked sound. It's surprisingly loud too, for such a compact set of earbuds, and the hefty volume really helps to drive the pounding drums and bass forward. Even so, the sound still feels a little static and needs a bit more elbow room to really flex its percussive muscles.

**It has a precise, clear sound that works particularly well with classical music**

The high volume also helps when using noise cancellation – when all else fails you can simply drown out any stray background noise that manages to get through. At more modest volumes, the AH-C830NCW does a good job blocking out the low-frequency rumble of planes, although it's less effective with higher frequencies and background voices can still leak through at times ●

**HI-FI Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★½☆

**LIKE:** Clear, detailed sound with plenty of volume

**DISLIKE:** No aptX; soundstage could be wider

**WE SAY:** Not too original, but a good, low-cost option

**OVERALL** ★★★★☆

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# Klipsch T5 II ANC £300

## Klipsch's updated T5 earbuds vie with Apple to provide the latest high-tech features

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**
Klipsch T5 II ANC

**ORIGIN**
USA/China

**TYPE**
Bluetooth earbuds

**WEIGHT**
5.5g each (buds)
77g (case)

**FEATURES**
- 5.8mm drivers
- Adjustable noise cancellation
- Qi wireless charging case

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Home AV Direct

Priced at £300, Klipsch's T5 II ANC is the most expensive of the wireless earbuds in the group, but it manages to come up with some high-tech features that even Apple can't match. Available in a variety of colours, it has an unusual oval design that looks rather bulky, although it does fit into the ear quite comfortably and Klipsch includes six different sizes of ear-tips to provide a good fit. This is one of the few earbuds that I'd feel comfortable wearing when running, and the IPX4 rating mean that it's water resistant.

As the name suggests, the T5 II ANC includes active noise cancellation, with a Transparency Mode that allows you to let in some background noise when required. Klipsch's Connect app includes a simple slider control that allows you to manually adjust the level of cancellation to suit your surroundings. You can even program special functions, called 'sidekicks', such as automatically turning on Transparency Mode during phone calls so that you can hear your own voice more clearly.

There's a six-band equaliser that provides a number of presets, as well as the ability to save your own custom settings. Klipsch also features a technology called Bragi, which monitors the movement of your head in order to give commands, such as nodding to accept a phone call. Oddly, this relatively expensive set of earbuds doesn't support aptX for Bluetooth audio, simply relying on the standard SBC codec and Apple's AAC. However, the T5 II ANC does include Dirac HD Sound audio correction that is said to be tuned to the mechanical properties of individual headphones.

### Sound quality

Battery life is a respectable seven hours, although that drops to five when using noise cancellation. However, the sturdy charging case allows you to charge the earbuds three more times and also supports Qi wireless charging.

By default, the Dirac sound tuning is turned on – which is probably just as well, as the basic sound quality provided by the T5 II ANC is a little disappointing, sounding somewhat distant and lacking in presence. Thankfully, Dirac cleans up the sound quite noticeably, although it really just puts in on a par with the other AAC-based earbuds in the group. We also find that it helps to fine-tune the EQ settings a little in order to boost Damien Rice's vocals on *The Blower's Daughter*, allowing those hesitant murmurings to sit more comfortably alongside the guitar and strings. The T5 II ANC does well with those instruments, though, catching all the little finger-scratch noises on the acoustic guitar and producing a pure, delicate sound for the slow cello.

There's a similar light touch on the ambient sounds of *Flight From The City*, with the gentle piano refrain hanging lightly in the air as the strings slowly weave around in a delicate counterpoint. However, the T5 II ANC starts to struggle with the denser wall of sound on *The Big Sky*. It lands the slap bass with satisfying firmness and catches the lighter percussion shimmering in the background, but it loses balance a little as the layers of heavy drums and chanting chorus pile up all around. And, like other earbuds that rely on the AAC codec, the soundstage feels a little constrained and static as the song romps away on the final chorus.

**Battery life is a very respectable seven hours and there's Qi wireless charging**

On a final positive note, the noise-cancellation option works well throughout, firmly blocking out the deep rumble of airline cabin noise, even with the music volume playing relatively low. Some of the voices and higher frequencies do leak through at times, but no worse than most of its rivals ●

**HI-FI Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★½☆
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★½☆
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★★½

**LIKE:** Delicate sound for gentler classical and acoustic music

**DISLIKE:** Expensive; struggles with densely layered sound

**WE SAY:** Impressive technology, but sound quality leaves room for improvement

**OVERALL** ★★★½☆

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# Technics EAH-AZ60 £200

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

## From a patience-testing start, the EAH-AZ60 quickly turns things around to show its true worth

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**
Technics EAH-AZ60

**ORIGIN**
Japan/Malaysia

**TYPE**
Bluetooth earbuds

**WEIGHT**
7g each (buds)
45g (case)

**FEATURES**
- 8mm drivers
- Supports: SBC; AAC; LDAC
- IPX4 water resistant
- Active noise cancellation

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Technics UK

It has to be said that the Technics' EAH-AZ60 doesn't make a great first impression. The £200 price tag is tempting, but the charging case that holds the earbuds feels rather light and flimsy compared with most of its rivals. And, upon downloading the Technics Audio Connect app, you're presented with pages of irritating terms and conditions and some rather confusing instructions. You're told to 'optimise' the noise-cancelling features by finding a noisy location and then fiddling with a slider to try and block out as much sound as possible. That's all very well if you happen to be sitting on a train or in a busy coffee shop – but not especially practical if you're quietly working at home on your own.

Thankfully, things pick up after that, and the EAH-AZ60 manages to stand out from its rivals with a number of useful features. Most notably, it's one of the few earbuds to support Sony's 'hi-res' LDAC codec for Bluetooth audio. That means it's primarily suited for use with other Sony devices that also support LDAC, although this relatively new codec is gradually being adopted by a number of Android devices as well. For the rest of us, the EAH-AZ60 offers the basic SBC codec or Apple's AAC.

The compact earbuds are pretty well designed, fitting firmly and comfortably, with five sizes of ear-tips included. Like most of its rivals, the EAH-AZ60 provides active noise cancellation (ANC) with an Ambient Mode that lets in some background noise, but there's also an Attention Mode designed to focus on voices.

### Sound quality

Battery life is a bit complicated as it depends on both the codec you're using and whether or not noise cancelling is activated. Using AAC on my iPad gives around seven hours with ANC turned on, and 7.5 hours without. That drops quite a bit when using LDAC– to 4.5 and 5 hours respectively – although you can get two more charges from the case.

Jumping in at the deep end, the EAH-AZ60 responds well to the densely layered sound of *The Big Sky*, standing back and finding room for the cascade of drums and percussion, while the chanted chorus has an infectious energy that keeps the song breezing along as Bush and her band go: "walking out on the big, big sky".

That ability to just get out of the way of the music works a treat for *The Blower's Daughter* too, providing an open, spacious soundstage for the performance. Damien Rice's acoustic guitar strumming feels very relaxed, perfectly in tune with his whispery vocals, and the EAH-AZ60 really captures the wistful tone of the slow cello as it winds through the air at the end of each chorus.

That sense of space is also apparent on *The Waves*, as the compact little earbuds manage to create a highly immersive sound as the swirling sounds of the sea seem to wash all around me. The slowly building surge of the orchestra is well judged, creating a real sense of tension and unease, and the floating electronic

**This is one of the few earbuds to support Sony's 'hi-res' LDAC codec for Bluetooth**

chimes are as clear and delicate as snowflakes. The introduction of soprano Grace Davidson is haunting, as her voice soars over the more slowly paced orchestra. However, the EAH-AZ60 evokes the slow crescendo of the strings with great clarity and precision, allowing it to gradually take centre stage and build to a dramatic conclusion. The only real disappointment is that the noise-cancellation features leave room for improvement, allowing quite a lot of voices and higher frequencies through, and also a little of the deeper aircraft noise that some of its rivals are able to block out more effectively ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

| | |
|---|---|
| SOUND QUALITY | ★★★★½ |
| VALUE FOR MONEY | ★★★★ |
| BUILD QUALITY | ★★★★ |
| FEATURES | ★★★★ |

**LIKE:** Spacious, detailed sound; LDAC and AAC support

**DISLIKE:** No aptX; noise cancellation could be stronger

**WE SAY:** A few rough edges don't mar Technics' attractive price and sound quality

**OVERALL** ★★★★½

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AURALIC PRESS AWARDS

# Group test verdict

## These earbuds provide a dazzling array of high-tech features, but sound quality is what really matters, as ***Cliff Joseph*** reveals

**THERE'S AN OLD** saying: "the good thing about standards is that there's so many of them". That's very much the case with the Bluetooth earbuds in this group, with AAC-equipped ones catering to Apple owners, aptX for Android and newcomer LDAC for Sony users.

A couple of years ago, aptX seemed to be the option of choice for Bluetooth in-ears, but in 2022 it's Apple's AAC that seems to have swept the board. Klipsch's T5 II ANC is one of the more expensive AAC options, but its experiment with the alternative Dirac HD Sound isn't entirely successful, and its modest battery life is rather disappointing for the £300 price.

In contrast, Denon's AH-C830NCW takes a more back-to-basics approach. It doesn't even have an app for mobile devices, but it provides good sound quality via AAC and its bargain price makes it a great alternative to Apple's AirPods Pro. Needless to say, the AirPods Pro is one of the best options for Apple owners, boasting automatic play/pause and spatial audio. Sound quality is very good, although the design won't suit everyone and the battery is disappointing for the price.

However, all this talk of Bluetooth and codecs is irrelevant for Astell&Kern's AK Zero1. Opting for a wired connection and impressive triple-driver design, it's hardly surprising that the AK Zero1 takes top honours for sound quality. It's expensive, though – more than twice the price of any of its Bluetooth rivals – and lacks active noise cancellation, which is now considered essential by many users.

Technics supports AAC with its EAH-AZ60 and provides strong sound quality, but also stands out with its support for Sony's LDAC.

**WINNER**

**The ATH-CKS50TW might have chunky earpieces, but they squeeze in impressive battery, effective noise cancellation and strong sound quality. And, most important of all, support for both AAC and aptX Adaptive for use with both Apple and Android devices.**

| Make/model | Apple AirPods Pro | Astell&Kern AK Zero 1 | Audio-Technica ATH-CKS50TW | Denon AH-C830NCW | Klipsch T5 II ANC | Technics EAH-AZ60 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Price** | £240 | £650 | £150 | £140 | £300 | £200 |
| **Sound** | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★½ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★½☆ | ★★★★½ |
| **Value** | ★★★½☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★½☆ | ★★★★☆ |
| **Build** | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ |
| **Features** | ★★★★☆ | ★★★☆☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★½☆ | ★★★★½ | ★★★★☆ |
| **Overall** | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★½ | ★★★★☆ | ★★★½☆ | ★★★★½ |
| | Great design, but really only gives its best when paired with Apple devices | No wireless operation, no problem. The sound is superb, but the price is high | The perfect balance of performance, features, battery life and a generous price | A more affordable Apple substitute with clear, detailed sound and plenty of volume | A delicate sound that is better suited to classical and acoustic material | An attractive price alongside spacious, detailed sound and Sony's LDAC support |
| **Website** | apple.com | astellkern.co.uk | audio-technica.com | denon.com | klipsch.com | technics.com |

### Key features

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Bluetooth** | SBC, AAC | No | SBC, AAC, aptX Adap. | SBC, AAC | SBC, AAC | SBC, AAC, LDAC |
| **Wired mode** | No | Yes | No | No | No | No |
| **Noise cancelling** | Yes | N/A | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| **Battery (ANC off)** | 5 hours | N/A | 20 hours | 6 hours | 7 hours | 7.5 hours |
| **Battery (ANC on)** | 4.5 hours | N/A | 15 hours | 4.8 hours | 5 hours | 7 hours |
| **Wireless charging** | Yes | N/A | No | No | Yes | No |

**TRY WITH THESE**

**STREAMING SERVICE:**
Apple Music **£9.99/month** ***HFC* 487**

It took Apple Music too long to adopt lossless and hi-res, but at least it did so without raising its prices. It also added support for Dolby Atmos to provide a 'spatial audio' option – something it claims will work with most types of headphones, as well as its own AirPods.

**BATTERY PACK:**
Belkin Boost Charge 5K **£50**

If you're travelling with a smartphone and in-ears, a portable battery pack can be a lifesaver. The Boost Charge 5K is neatly designed and affordable, with USB-A and USB-C connectors for charging devices.

**PLAYBACK SOFTWARE:**
Roon **£120/year** ***HFC* 448**

Roon isn't cheap, but it allows you to combine music from many different sources and devices, and wraps it up in a slick, professional interface. The software runs on a wide range of devices too, including Macs, Windows, iOS and Android.

## Choice EXOTICA PS AUDIO ASPEN FR30 £28,000

# 50 years in the making

## Inspired by Eighties giants, PS Audio's inaugural loudspeaker boasts a stunning sound to match its striking looks

At a time when every new high-end product seems to come with an extensive backstory, the legend behind the aspen FR30, the first speaker from Colorado-based PS Audio, still takes some beating. The £28,000-a-pair floorstander has, we're told, been "50 years in the making", which places its beginnings just before that of the company itself, started by Paul McGowan and Stan Warren in 1973. In between times, McGowan left, worked with Arnie Nudell of Infinity Systems and then bought back the PS Audio name in the late Nineties, becoming its CEO. So we can safely assume that what is now realised as the aspen FR30 has been in the works for all that time.

Though the Infinity Systems speakers – all four enclosures – have certainly been influential in PS Audio's own project, what we've ended up with couldn't be much further removed. The aspen FR30 may be big, at almost 1.54m tall including the base, and heavy – 104.5kg each – but it's relatively slender and hardly dominates a room as would a 2.3m tall IRS complete with bass towers. Available in the Pearl White of the review pair or Sable Black, both finished in 20 layers of hand-rubbed lacquer, it's also sensibly priced – at least in high-end hi-fi terms. Sure enough, £28k is well into 'new car' territory, but there's no shortage of ways to spend considerably more on a pair of speakers.

The aspen FR30 is very much a speaker of two parts – quite literally, with both parts fitting together using a custom-machined sliding mount that also allows some adjustment between the two if required. The upper part contains the midrange and treble segments, in a sealed cabinet, while the lower part, mounted on its own slender stand, houses the bass, using no fewer than four drivers and a quartet of side-firing auxiliary bass radiators (ABRs) for each channel. The cabinet's rounded shape to the base, and the way it seems to hang in air on the single support of the stand, makes the whole enterprise look even slimmer, although the enclosure is actually less than 26cm wide – just enough to accommodate the 20cm bass units. And the whole footprint, including the stand, is just 40 x 65cm. Deep, but hardly huge, then, although the speaker does have a suitably commanding in-room presence.

Everything here has been custom designed. The treble drivers – yes, there are two, with one to the rear to control the 'space' in the sound – and midrange unit using planar magnetic technology said by the designers to give: "the speed of an electrostatic

**The combination of power, resolution and lack of effort is totally compelling**

with the dynamics of a cone". Using ultra-light Teonex diaphragms driven by neodymium motors in a push-pull configuration, the 64mm treble unit and the 255mm midrange above it are designed to drive air with minimal coloration, the midrange working from 400Hz up to 2.5kHz before handing over to the tweeters.

The rear 'Near/Far' facility adjusts the response at the baffle step. PS Audio offers this correction if it sounds too thick or full when the deep cabinet is placed near a rear wall. Lifting the mid/treble response corrects the boundary bass boost back to 'flat'. However, PS Audio recommends the speaker be used away from boundaries and in its 'Far' configuration.

The bass units, meanwhile, are long-throw drivers, their 203mm aluminium diaphragms being built into cast alloy chassis and driven by massive motors weighing almost 5.5kg, all designed to match the speed and transparency of the planar magnetic drivers up above them.

The diaphragms are suspended on a double spider for control, while the motor uses a split magnetic gap and double Faraday ring to control inductance and enhance bandwidth. PS Audio has avoided the obvious solution of porting the cabinet to augment its bass, and instead uses that quartet of passive radiators –, two on each side of the enclosure. Coloured white or black to match the chosen cabinet finish, the flat surface of the ABRs has a decidedly 'biscuit-tin clunk' when rapped with the knuckles, even though we'll discover that these suspended discs seem to work rather well when in action.

The enclosure itself uses MDF for the main body, with thermoset fibreglass resin composite employed in the front baffle. The latter has integrated waveguides for the high-frequency drivers, while the base is aluminium with milled brass spikes and optional plastic feet for hard surfaces. Extensive internal bracing is used to stiffen the enclosure and 'compartmentalise' the internal volume. Finally, the crossover in the cabinet is a two-part design, with separate mid/tweeter and bass driver networks.

Designer Chris Brunhaver explains that air-cored coils are used throughout for high-power handling and low distortion, including a massive 2.5kg coil wound with 12-gauge wire – over 2mm thick – for the bass section, along with wire-wound resistors and metallised film capacitors throughout, apart from the electrolytics used to flatten the impedance curve at low frequencies.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**
PS Audio aspen FR30

**ORIGIN**
USA

**TYPE**
3-way floorstanding ABR-loaded loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**
105kg

**DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
406 x 1,537 x 654mm

**FEATURES**
- 2x 64mm planar magnetic tweeters
- 255mm planar magnetic midrange driver
- 4x 203mm aluminium cone bass drivers
- 4x 255mm side-firing passive radiators
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Signature Audio Systems, UK

**WEBSITE**
psaudio.com
signaturesystems.co.uk

## Sound quality

Having read about the development of this speaker literally for years, in various online postings, we are naturally both keen to hear it and also filled with a little trepidation that it might not live up to expectation. We needn't have worried: it only takes a few tracks to realise that the aspen FR30 is every bit a sensational design and – to cut to the chase – nothing short of one of the high-end bargains of the moment, making some much pricier speakers seem just a little bit silly in comparison.

Used on the end of a Melco/dCS Vivaldi/Constellation system – so with plenty of power to meet the speaker's 100-600W recommendation – the aspen FR30 is immediately ▶

## IN SIGHT

1. Planar magnetic drivers sealed in enclosure (64mm tweeter and 255mm midrange driver)
2. 255mm auxiliary bass radiators ABRs (two on each side)
3. 4x 203mm alloy-coned bass drivers
4. Near/Far proximity and tweeter level controls
5. Woofer and mid/high binding posts
6. Adjustable 'short stand' and outriggers

### INTERVIEW WITH THE CEO

**"My love of planar drivers, and the work of Infinity's Arnie Nudell in particular, goes back to the late Seventies," recalls PS Audio's CEO Paul McGowan.**

**"Up until that moment I'd only been exposed to dynamic driver loudspeakers with the occasional smattering of Quad and Acoustat electrostatics, and a smidge of Magneplanars. I was more than familiar with the limitations of both extremes – dynamics performed to their namesake, but lacked transparency while electrostatic and full range 'planars hadn't much in the way of dynamics. The Infinity IRS III changed all that for me.**

**"The IRS' combination of 64 ribbon tweeters, 24 planar mids and a tower with 12 servo controlled woofers took my breath away.**

**"Working with Arnie, we were convinced that, with modern versions of planar drivers coupled with the dynamics of proper woofers, we could get close to the magic I had experienced, but at prices more people could afford. But it wasn't until Chris Brunhaver joined the team after Arnie's passing that this elusive dream became a reality."**

compelling in its combination of power, resolution and lack of effort in delivering the music. Rarely have we heard a loudspeaker – and more to the point a large speaker – able to 'hang together' quite so well, such that it is impossible to single out individual aspects of the performance for acclaim or criticism.

It sets out its stall immediately with a driving, snarling rendition of Yes' *Roundabout* from the 1971 *Fragile* album, the sensational attack, drive and sheer low-end power ensuring the music pounds from the speaker while all the noodling above is ruthlessly, and thrillingly, revealed.

It's breathtaking at high levels, but then the aspen FR30 is just as captivating with the delicate pianism of Anna Fedorova's *Shaping Chopin* set, placing the instrument in a near-palpable acoustic, or the lush, fluid interplay between soloist and orchestra of Marc Coppey's *French Cello* recital.

Switch to the gentle lyricism of the title track from Mark Knopfler's 2005 EP *The Trawlerman's Song* and the focus of the speaker is entirely on the voice and instrumentation. It conjures up the spirit of the song, just as it does with Pearl Jam singer Eddie Vedder's *The Haves* from his recently released third solo LP, *Earthling*, despite making very clear the sibilant nature of the vocal. Understandably, the aspen FR30 sounds outstanding blasting out Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide To The Orchestra* with the Kansas City Symphony/Michael Stern recording.

This is as dramatic and detailed as we have ever heard it – and we've heard it a lot as it's one of our favourite review test pieces – opening up with that stately Purcell theme and demonstrating relentless focus and beautiful timbral revelation as the various sections of the band go through their party pieces.

The aspen FR30 is every bit as adept with sweeping strings as it is with skittering woodwind accented with the metallic rattle of tambourine, and delicious with the plangent harp. And then it gathers all of its considerable resources for the effortless transition into the great fugue at the end, complete with shimmering gong.

### HOW IT COMPARES

**For at least five years, Bowers & Wilkins has had a stranglehold on the top-end speaker scene with its £22,500 800 D3 and, latterly, with the £30,000 801 D4 (*HFC* 482) floorstanders. With its in-house design and manufacturing, plus economy of scale, B&W always had a head start... up until now. PS Audio's aspen FR30 provides a very compelling alternative in both technical and subjective performance as does the new Blade One Meta from KEF, also starting at £30,000. The latter combines the focus, imaging and definition you'd expect of the finest miniatures, but written into a big and weighty sonic picture with spectacular results. Audiophiles shopping in this rarified sector have never been so spoilt for choice!**

## It may be big, but the FR30 is relatively slender and hardly dominates a room

But it's just as effective with the exuberant playing on Tuomas Antero Turunen's *Joy Dance* from his *Lifesparks* album, fully making the listening experience live up to the title. Similarly, albeit different, the *Helensburgh Tango* from the Tord Gustavsen Trio's *Opening* album is wonderfully dark and sombre, with its snare rolls and recessed instruments very unsettling.

## Conclusion

Once again, the speaker soars with Sandrine Piau's voice on her *Rivales* album, her aria from Gluck's *La Clemenza de Tito* especially vibrant, thanks to the cabinet's free-breathing sound and purity of tone. It goes on to present Holly Coles' voice on *I Could Write A Book* with superb intimacy as she duets with Wycliffe Gordon before slipping into the languorous *Lazy Afternoon*, her voice set against the gentle Hammond B3 of Larry Goldings.

Pretty much everything we play through the aspen FR30 sounds delicious and it'll be tough going back to listening to anything else ●

### Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★

**LIKE:** Immaculate finish; openness and control

**DISLIKE:** Nothing

**WE SAY:** A truly revelationary listening experience, time to buy a lottery ticket...

OVERALL ★★★★★

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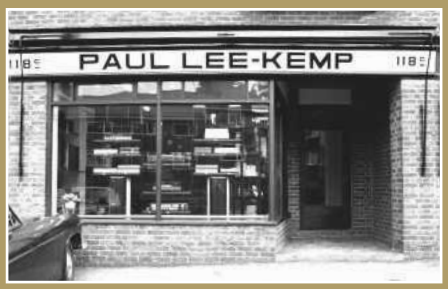
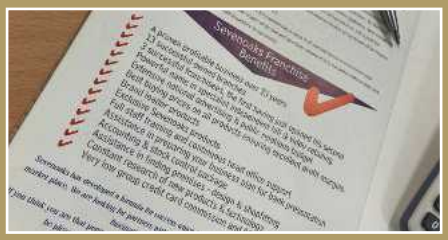
# It's an incredible 50 years since Paul Lee-Kemp launched a new breed of specialist hi-fi store, starting out with one tiny shop in Sevenoaks.



## THE EARLY YEARS

Our beginnings were modest! Back in 1972, Paul Lee-Kemp (widely known as PLK), a 21-year-old who was fresh out of university, had a desire to do something different for those who loved music. With the help of a small loan from his father, he opened his first Hi-Fi shop in Sevenoaks, Kent. Soon, PLK was hunting for additional premises and along with Peter O'Brien, who became a long standing, trusted business partner, they opened the second Sevenoaks Hi-Fi branch in Woolwich, South East London. By 1980, stores in Chatham, Tunbridge Wells and Brighton had also opened, with another four stores added by 1990.




## WE OPEN OUR FIRST FRANCHISES

It was in the mid-90s that the partners decided to accelerate our expansion so in 1995 they launched the Sevenoaks franchise model, and the brand rapidly expanded with another 30 Sevenoaks stores opening, stretching across the UK from Aberdeen to Plymouth.

## INTO THE 2000s

In the early 2000s, the company made some structural changes including changing the name to Sevenoaks Sound and Vision, to reflect the importance of TVs and home cinema to the business. In 2014 PLK took a back seat from the day-to-day running of the business, handing over to current Managing Director, Rob Lawley. Rob and his team continue to maintain the ethos of fairness to all that has been there since day one and sets the company apart from many of its competitors.

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Price excludes speaker stands

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Price excludes speaker stands

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NEW **£7000**

Price excludes speaker stands

HHFI Choice EDITOR'S CHOICE

### Q ACOUSTICS • CONCEPT 30

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NEW **£899**

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## KEF

### LS60 Wireless

Wireless Speakers

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NEW

Designed by Michael Young in collaboration with the KEF product design team, this contemporary design addition to the KEF family defies the limits of audio performance with its iconic slim structure. The LS60 Wireless is a celebration of 60 years of sound innovation with a clear eye on the future high-fidelity experience.

LS60 Wireless delivers robust, high-quality streaming using any format you can imagine, thanks to the same class-leading W2 wireless platform KEF introduced on the award-winning LS50 Wireless II. No matter which music service, podcast, internet radio or wired source, LS60 Wireless delivers a peerless performance.

## BLUESOUND

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021 MUSIC STREAMERS Bluesound Node (2021) PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

NEW

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NEW **POWERNODE £849**
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## SONOS

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021 MULTI-ROOM SYSTEM Sonos PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

# Everything all at once

Audiolab enters the all-in-one sector with a product that offers a very comprehensive specification. ***Ed Selley*** shakes it down

A product's name is rarely the work of a moment. Choosing something memorable, relevant and that doesn't mean something wildly unsuitable can take a while to agree on. It speaks to a certain degree of confidence on Audiolab's part that its first foray into the all-in-one market wears the name Omnia; Latin for 'everything.' As a statement of faith in the specification, it's fairly emphatic.

A measure of Audiolab's confidence being well founded is that the list of features the Omnia doesn't have that can be found in its key competition is limited to HDMI ARC and AirPlay. From there, the list of things it can do is long and extremely impressive. What makes it relatively unusual is that it has a 'three-pronged' approach to accommodating digital. The most conventional of these is the inclusion of a streaming module making use of the DTS Play-Fi interface. This can also access locally stored content and stream direct from a variety of streaming services.

This is partnered with a selection of digital inputs: two coaxial, two optical and a USB-B port offering the highest sample rate handling of any connection on the Omnia, with 768kHz PCM and DSD512 supported. This USB connection also has its own Roon profile too. Then, most unusually of all, there's a CD mechanism built in which puts it in a fairly specialist category of products offering this trio of options. All of the digital connections (and the Bluetooth input) are decoded by an ESS ES9038Q2M 32-bit DAC, which is both a fairly high-spec device and something that Audiolab has a huge amount of experience implementing.

This is further supported by an analogue section that is barely less comprehensive. Three RCA line inputs are joined by a moving-magnet phono stage that uses the same JFET based circuit that was introduced in the 6000A Play. There is a power amp in and preamp out and a 6.35mm headphone socket. Internally, the Omnia eschews any Class D-based solution in favour of a Class AB amplifier offering 50W into 8ohm and 75W into 4ohm. This outputs via a single set of speaker terminals. There are more powerful options available, but there are not many price appropriate speakers that the Audiolab will struggle with.

This is a significant amount of functionality to implement in one box and the manner it has been done yields mixed results. The Omnia has plenty of inputs, but they can only be cycled through (in either direction) rather than accessed directly – save for CD, Bluetooth and USB, which Audiolab has allocated buttons for on the remote. Navigating around the features never feels especially rapid and this same slight lack of urgency is present on Play-Fi too – which is not as slick to browse and use as some rival operating systems. Used in isolation, the Omnia is cohesive but rival products (admittedly juggling rather less connectivity) make it feel a little sluggish.

**The digital section gives an excellent demo of Audiolab's know-how in this area**

There is very little anywhere near the price as well made as this, though. The all-metal chassis is finished to an exceptionally high standard with little in the way of visible fixings. Everything feels carefully and extensively thought out. I find myself a little torn on the looks; part of me would have preferred something closer to Audiolab's separates, but I can also appreciate how carefully the

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**
Audiolab Omnia

**ORIGIN**
UK/China

**TYPE**
All-in-one system

**WEIGHT**
9.1kg

**DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
440 x 156 x 327mm

**FEATURES**
- Claimed power output: 2x 50W (8ohm)
- Connections: 3x stereo RCA inputs; MM phono; power amp in; preamp out
- Digital board: 2x optical; 2x coaxial; USB B; DTS Play Fi streaming; Bluetooth

**DISTRIBUTOR**
IAG

**TELEPHONE**
01480 452561

**WEBSITE**
audiolab.co.uk

company has worked features like the right hand-mounted power button into something a little different. The decision to fit the large display is a good one. It's easy to see what the Omnia is doing at a glance and to access the various setup menus and the digital VU meters and/or the display can be turned off completely if it's a distraction

## Sound quality

The principle reason why most people will tolerate any operating foibles is because the Omnia offers a level of performance that very little under £2,000 can get anywhere near. Listen to the oddly named but very engaging *Oochya!* by Stereophonics and it takes this solid but by no means stellar recording and ensures that it sounds usefully refined. Critically, it does this without smoothing off so many of the rough edges that the band's character is lost. Kelly Jones sounds like Kelly Jones and the infectious get up and go of *Running Around My Brain* is beautifully captured.

Some of this is down to clearly discernible Audiolab DNA at work. The Omnia might look rather different to the 6000A Series that came before it, but some of the same balance is present across the analogue and digital sections. The digital board in particular is a truly excellent demonstration of Audiolab's know-how in this area. In keeping with many components that use an ESS DAC, the Omnia is capable of tremendous detail retrieval; the highly distinctive hang percussive instrument that the Portico Quartet uses to such great effect on *Monument* is beautifully defined and given the weight and scale it deserves as the centrepiece. This is achieved without the slightly 'etched' presentation that can sometimes come with it. Revisiting some of the CDs I've never got around to ripping, the Omnia sounds genuinely invigorating.

**HOW IT COMPARES**

**The challenge Omnia faces will be from people who are not necessarily sure that they need everything it does (perhaps most specifically, if they will go and rip an extant CD collection and stream it instead). If you decide to go down that particular route, NAD's C700 (*HFC* 486) comes into play. It can't quite match the functionality of the Omnia, but the integration of its functionality into BluOS and the fitment of that HDMI ARC connection means it's easier to use across the smaller range of things it does. The strength in depth of the Audiolab is hard to ignore, though.**

The analogue section doesn't let the side down either. I'm not completely sure what you'd be joining to those line input connections that the Audiolab doesn't already do in its own chassis, but connecting a Chord Qutest DAC (*HFC* 436) over RCA demonstrates the amplification of the Omnia is very closely tonally matched to the digital side and that it doesn't give very much away over USB to the standalone DAC.

The phono stage is also something of a star. Connected to a Rega Planar 10 (*HFC* 456) mounting a Vertere Sabre (*HFC* 483) moving-magnet cartridge, the Omnia is able to do justice to this considerably more expensive vinyl front end. Of all the various functionality aspects this is perhaps the part with the most overt character and makes itself felt in a manner that is wholly benign. The gorgeous *Build A Problem* by Dodie is possessed of a fraction of extra warmth and engagement across the midrange that emphasises the glorious production and Dodie's ear for arrangement.

The levels of gain available from the phono stage are a little lower than from the analogue line section or digital inputs, but even here with both the Spendor A1 (*HFC* 460) and Focal Kanta No1 (*HFC* 454) the Omnia is never low on headroom – although some of the smoothness and refinement that it possesses at lower levels is lost as volume climbs. This also applies to the headphone output, which does its best work with reasonably sensitive designs

## Conclusion

Being asked to choose partnering transducers that give at least a passing nod to sensitivity is hardly the end of the world, though. It's one of a series of small trade offs; the other two being that slightly clunky interface and the somewhat anodyne appearance. If you can accept these, what you get in return is a device that offers a tremendous spec and sounds excellent across all of it. It isn't perfect, but the Omnia's 'one box to rule them all' thinking has resulted in one of the best all-in-one systems available under two grand ●

**HDMI ARC and AirPlay are the only real things missing here**

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½

FEATURES ★★★★½

**LIKE:** Excellent functionality with strong performance; well made

**DISLIKE:** Slightly sluggish to operate

**WE SAY:** A superb all-in-one that offers excellent performance across its wide spread of connections

**OVERALL** ★★★★★

# High and mighty

There are small speakers, tall speakers and speakers like the Voodoo which just make you stop and stare. ***David Vivian*** takes it on

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**
Ophidian Voodoo

**ORIGIN**
UK

**TYPE**
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**
59.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
304 x 1,300 x 365mm

**FEATURES**
- 22mm fabric dome tweeter
- 80mm aluminium cone mid/bass driver
- 2x 265mm aluminium cone bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Ophidian Audio Ltd.

**WEBSITE**
ophidian.co.uk

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Does size really matter? Experiencing Voodoo might well provide the answer. No, I don't mean Hendrix, Winwood, Mason and Cassidy giving *Voodoo Chile* the full business. Which isn't to say Jimi won't get his turn later because, for our purposes, Voodoo is what you see here – specialist British speaker maker Ophidian's XXL statement on the art of go-for-broke, flagship floorstander.

Believe me, pictures give very little idea of how big and heavy it is. Let's wheel in B&W's 702 Signature (*HFC* 480) for comparison. It's 994mm tall and weighs a beefy 29.5kg. Certainly large enough to get noticed. Not weedy by any stretch. Yet you could hide a 702 in the shadow cast by the Voodoo. It would be like Tyson Fury putting a protective arm around Tom Cruise. The Voodoo is 1,300mm high, 304mm wide and weighs nearly 60kg. It needs as much house room as a floorstanding Wilson Audio or Magico. It's taller than my mum.

Ophidian's founder, designer and boss, Gareth James, delivers the Voodoos to me personally which, to say the least, is a welcome pair of helping hands for getting it setup.

## Voodoo's dynamic headroom and midband openness are unprecedented

Voodoo sure is a big statement for Ophidian, a company I described as a tiny, vision-led, auteur-style loudspeaker maker when I reviewed its previous flagship, the £5k P3 Evolution (*HFC* 451). That was back in 2020 – and it's a testament to James' skill, and not least the effectiveness of his proprietary Aeroflex bass loading system – that, until its retirement, the P3 Evolution appeared in *HFC*'s *Buying Guide* every month. I would say big shoes to fill but, well, you've got the idea by now.

Ophidian's lineup of models may have evolved, but its founding MO has not. Obviously, there's the ambition to give the big brands a run for their money, but not by trying to emulate them and design and manufacture everything in-house – a functional impossibility. Instead, the approach is to combine fine, bought-in ingredients and apply fresh thinking to some old, established ideas.

It's a very large three-way floorstander employing two 265mm bass drivers, a 180mm mid/bass unit and a 22mm soft dome tweeter. It's

no surprise that the bass drivers' black anodised aluminium cones have powerful motor systems with large magnet assemblies, but James notes that the design features three shorting rings to help reduce distortion to very low levels. This despite the bass drivers having a claimed linear excursion of over 25mm which, in league with the Aeroflex loading, is said to fill even the largest listening room with active subwoofer-rivalling bass power and extension.

Aeroflex is Ophidian's USP. Essentially a hybrid of transmission line and conventional reflex porting, its job is to keep the drivers fully loaded until they hit their natural useful excursion limits. James says that most reflex systems 'unload' the drivers once the port velocities reach a certain point, precipitating a lack of cone control and the onset of port 'chuffing'. He contends that Aeroflex is a way of getting around this without going to a full transmission line, which he says has its own drawbacks. The system is built directly into the cabinet with additional panels that act as both the port system (which vents at the bottom of the rear baffle) and bracing to bolster the enclosure's rigidity. A modest amount of soft damping material is used to absorb internal resonances and reflections, but not so much as to impede the critical airflow that allows the port system to function properly.

The mid/bass driver matches its fellow drive units with a powerful magnet system, while the use of aluminium extends to the solid phase plug as well as the cone. And, mirroring the design of the bass drivers, there are multiple shorting paths to minimise distortion. Key to the midband performance, however, is the separate, damped sub-enclosure that isolates the driver from the external walls of the cabinet and potential colouration.

As with the discontinued P3 Evolution, the 22mm fabric dome tweeter, which sits below the mid/bass driver, is from Sonomex and the crossover components are made by Mundorf. The tweeter has a large roll surround, allowing a lower than usual crossover point, but still has excellent off-axis dispersion for a wide 'sweet spot' according to James. No variation on the large magnet theme for the smallest driver. From top to bottom, high power handling and accurate transient response are baked into the Voodoo's design. Classy WBT binding posts made from high purity copper conductors plated with 24-carat gold finish things off.

**HOW IT COMPARES**

**Anyone willing to spend £14k on a pair of speakers probably won't baulk at splashing a little more for an even weightier behemoth because shutting out B&W's magnificent, £20k 801 D4 (*HFC* 482) would be a shame. Like the Voodoo, it will go scarily loud but, just as impressive, the soundscape is huge and the low end from its big dual Aerofoil bass drivers both incredibly powerful and remarkably controlled. Like the towering Ophidian, the rotund 801 D4 draws you right into the music and just won't let go.**

## Sound quality

That we think so much about soundstage, imaging, scale, authority and the rest is, weirdly, a hunt for failure. Our attention is snagged by limitations we can identify and articulate. Wide but not especially deep. Lacks a little… height, focus, air, layering, solidity, whatever. Even if intended positively, all are descriptors that modify the reality we take for granted. Good equals not quite right. That's why the hi-fi journey is such a pleasurable struggle. It's the process of improvement via iterative, incremental matters of degree that feeds our obsession.

Then along comes a speaker like the Voodoo and, once hooked up to a suitably muscular amplifier – in this case a Chord TToby (*HFC* 423) taking its lead from a Chord Hugo TT2 DAC/pre (*HFC* 468) – getting tangled up in matters of presentational minutiae suddenly seems laughably irrelevant. When Hendrix and co finally hit their stride in the second half of *Voodoo Chile*, you're not hearing a delineated soundscape from a distance with a critical ear, but living a visceral musical experience defined by a relatable scale, the effortless force and finesse of unfettered dynamics, supple, weighty bass that breathes, stereo without obvious boundaries. It's a perceptual reset that once heard is hard to forget. The change of gear between the sauntering, late night looseness of *Voodoo Chile*'s opening five minutes and the gathering wrecking ball energy of Hendrix's solos towards the end is stunning.

The previous Ophidian P3 Evolution hinted strongly at loosening the hi-fi straitjacket, but Voodoo snaps the straps and ushers us into a larger world. Reprising Esperanza Spalding's *12 Little Spells* from the P3 review, the talent for tonal texture and warmth is just as evident, but the sheer amount of dynamic headroom and midband openness are unprecedented so that, once again, it doesn't just cease to be a topic for conversation, it never even occurs to me.

Leaning on the TToby's fast, clean and grippy 100W a side, the 87dB sensitive Voodoo drives my larger listening room to feeling guilty levels with such ease and giggle-inducing bass extension, I can't help wondering what it might be capable of on the other end of the something with half kilowatt pop. Maybe for another day.

## Conclusion

What Ophidian's Voodoo demonstrates so potently is that it's not all about loudness, dynamic clout and bass. It's hard to overestimate the value of sound you feel you can walk into with a sense of true scale and space, and it delivers this beautifully. Unlike some large panel designs, the wide-open presentation has fulsome body and the kind of bandwidth you can feel. This calibre of believability is true high-end and, as such, the £14k asking price suddenly seems very reasonable value as a result ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½

EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★☆

**LIKE:** Wide-open, walk-in soundstage; bandwidth; believability

**DISLIKE:** Size won't suit everyone

**WE SAY:** Big speaker, big price tag, but the results are spectacular. Oh and did we mention that it's big?

**OVERALL** ★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

# The X factor

The look hasn't changed in decades, but Grado's vow to stay on the pace is reflected in its new SR325x. ***David Vivian*** listens in

It's refreshing to deal with a brand for whom retro theming isn't marketing's new cool, but a form of flattery. The staunchly unchanging look is a clever conceit because it establishes a real point of difference: institutional retro as opposed to expediently revisited or completely contrived. Also, sonically, Grado on-ears frequently show their sleeker price peers a clean pair of heels.

The SR325 is the flagship model in the entry-level Prestige line and its new 'x' suffix marks the latest raft of improvements. The unapologetically bulky captive cable has been updated, the exposed foam earpads are flatter and the stitching on the leanly cushioned leather headband is of a lighter hue. But the more telling upgrades are internal and focus on a more powerful motor system for the 44mm drivers, which themselves feature revised diaphragms and reduced mass coils and are matched to within 0.05dB at the factory. The combined upshot aims to improve efficiency and reduce distortion. The physical termination is a 3.5mm jack, but this comes with a 6.3mm adapter.

As an open-backed design, ambient noise will be heard by the wearer as much as music leaking out by anyone nearby. Its advantage is a more naturally open, less closed-in sound, if usually a tad leaner in the bass.

The old-timer look and rugged build hardly scream 'premium' in the slick, luxury ear-spa sense. The thin, foam earpads appear to be alarmingly rudimentary and the largely unyielding headband, although trimmed in leather, doesn't look up for much bonce pampering. But truth is, the SR325x is very well made and finished, has a wide range of adjustment and is a good deal more comfortable than you might suppose.

## Sound quality

Although music on the move isn't a realistic option owing to the open-back design, the sources I line up include my Samsung S10+ smartphone – with and without the assistance of Chord's Mojo 2 (*HFC* 488) headphone amp/DAC – and Astell&Kern's terrific new SR25 MKII (*HFC* 489) DAP. More conventional home-based sources range from Chord's stellar Hugo TT2 (*HFC* 468) desktop DAC/headphone amp to the headphone output of a Cyrus ONE (*HFC* 420) integrated. Swapping between them all makes one thing crystal clear: the SR325x is superbly transparent, easily able to unpack the qualitative sonic differences in play without unduly punishing the less well endowed.

That said, and for no other reason than it pushes the Grado hardest and asks the most from it, I settle on the Hugo TT2 for most of the listening.

With this setup, bass is at its best with believable weight and extension but not a hint of bloat or blur. As a result, Marcus Miller giving his Fender Jazz Bass the lot on *Panther* sounds fast, propulsive and satisfyingly replete in pitch, texture and dynamic shading rather than the harbinger of a thumping headache. Great timing, too.

Treble is smooth, but has fine inner detail and transient precision. As for midband assets, the Grado does 'open and airy' with as much aplomb as it locates the stereo images therein. If you value clarity, subtlety and coherence, it is more than happy to oblige. Sarah McLachlan singing *Angel* from a Tidal Master stream has a lucid, easy-breathing presence, sounding wonderfully focused and natural – qualities not unrelated to its open-back design, but expertly realised by the SR325x.

## Conclusion

Headphones that wouldn't look out of place in a Fifties period drama featuring air traffic control delivering sound that, in most areas, sets the hi-fi bar. If that appeals, and you don't mind foregoing the last degree of earpad and headband comfort, the Grado SR325x all but chooses itself ●

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**
Grado SR325x

**ORIGIN**
USA

**TYPE**
On-ear, open-back dynamic headphones

**WEIGHT**
340g

**FEATURES**
- 44mm dynamic drivers
- Quoted sensitivity 99.8 dB/1W/1m
- Frequency response: 18Hz-24kHz

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Grado UK

**WEBSITE**
grado.co.uk

### Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
FEATURES ★★★★½

**LIKE:** Outstanding clarity and musical insight; robustly made

**DISLIKE:** Not the last word in comfort; Marmite looks

**WE SAY:** Grado's take on headphone design is different, but the results more than speak for themselves

OVERALL ★★★★★

rose

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# Pure joy

## Lypertek makes a move away from its more affordable offerings with the higher spec Z5, but **Ed Selley** thinks it's still a bit of a bargain

As the true-wireless sector grows, a lot of attention has been lavished on the more expensive end of the market. Lypertek by contrast has focused on being affordable by producing a selection of seriously capable sub-£100 designs. The PurePlay Z5 sees it move upmarket, but only to a pretty reasonable £120.

Each bud is fitted with a single 10mm dynamic driver that is placed in a reasonably compact body that uses a relatively small 'barrel' for the driver housing with a protuberance for the mic and charging contacts. Bluetooth transmission is handled by a Qualcomm QCC3046 chipset offering Bluetooth 5.2 with aptX, aptX Adaptive and AAC on top of the default SBC codec. The quoted battery life is up to seven hours with 28 hours available from the case.

The Active Noise Cancellation is the big addition for the Z5. Largely in keeping with the standard facilities available at the price, there are some little tweaks that are well thought out. A full noise-cancelling mode is partnered with a series of presets to adjust the processing and you can also tweak EQ output too. 'Ambient Mode' detects when the headphones aren't running and switches the noise cancelling off. In use, I find this to be very useful indeed.

Compared with more expensive offerings it feels less substantial. While they might not feel elegant, the earbuds feel robust, are extremely comfortable and deliver excellent Bluetooth stability under test with more than respectable range. Call quality is excellent and the control app is logical and responsive too. The case might not be the prettiest thing going, but it is more usefully pocket sized than many rivals.

### Sound quality

The available volume levels are more than respectable and, while I think that the 'flat' presentation as Lypertek shows it in the EQ settings is a trifle bass heavy, it's simple enough to reduce it by a notch or two and enjoy a presentation that is commendably even handed. The way that the Z5 delivers Thom Yorke's *Black Swan* is a pleasing combination of low-end heft and a refined yet energetic top end. Yorke's distinctive vocals are clear and the supporting electronica has the right air of menace. There's a consistent feeling of drive and timing to the overall performance too.

Where the Z5 is really impressive is its ability to create a soundstage that convincingly matches the music being played. Poppy Ackroyd's *Quail* is reproduced with much of the space of the original discernible, which is a neat trick for any in-ear. The piano is weighty and tonally believable too, although the supporting cello sounds a little thin and hard edged. Despite the presence of aptX HD, this is not really a device that reaps the benefits of lossless audio in the way that a few true-wireless models can.

Noise cancelling is useful and effective, however. Most importantly, it has little effect on the tonal balance of the Z5 when running. Tony Allen and Hugh Masekela's *Coconut Jam* is largely unaffected by turning it on and there isn't much in the way of the 'thickening' effect that can happen sometimes. The actual level of noise elimination is not as high as some premium rivals, but it can quell busy spaces effectively. It might not be my first choice for a flight, but it can certainly handle a rush-hour train.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the trump card of the Z5 is its £120 asking price. It might not be able to challenge some of the more premium offerings that we've tested in recent issues, but it's less than half the price of some of them and a good £100 cheaper than most of the others. When you consider how close it runs some of those designs and the fundamentally comfortable and practical nature of its design, it has to be seen as something of a bargain ●

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**
Lypertek PurePlay Z5

**ORIGIN**
China

**TYPE**
True-wireless noise-cancelling earphones

**WEIGHT**
55g (including case)

**FEATURES**
- 10mm dynamic driver
- Up to 7 hours battery + 28 hours via case
- Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz

**DISTRIBUTOR**
KS Distribution

**TELEPHONE**
01903 768919

**WEBSITE**
lypertek.com

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
FEATURES ★★★★½
OVERALL ★★★★½

**LIKE:** Lively and engaging sound; Bluetooth;comfort

**DISLIKE:** It's a little plasticy; not as revealing as some more expensive rivals

**WE SAY:** Exceptionally good for the price and well worth seeking out as an affordable option

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**- Chris Martens, HiFi+**

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

# New tricks

The latest arrivals from Rega might look like business as usual, but ***Ed Selley*** thinks there's a quiet revolution underway

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**
Rega Saturn MK3

**ORIGIN**
UK

**TYPE**
CD player

**WEIGHT**
9.7kg

**DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
432 x 82 x 320mm

**FEATURES**
- Top-loading CD mechanism
- Inpts: 2x optical; 2x coaxial; USB
- Outputs: RCA; 2x optical; 2x coaxial

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Rega Research Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**
01702 333071

**WEBSITE**
rega.co.uk

Over the last decade or so, two-channel audio has undergone one of the most revolutionary phases of evolution in its history. You can now construct tremendously capable stereo systems that look almost nothing like what would have been the case even a few years ago. As the margins between source and amp blur into nothing, some companies seem to have little interest in altering their approach – but even long-standing holdouts are making some changes. At first glance, what you see here is an ultra traditional pairing of amp and CD player, but the reality is a little more interesting.

As a prolific builder of turntables, Rega is a logical candidate to build amplifiers that concentrate on being amps, but even it has reached the decision that a little extra connectivity might help the cause. The Elicit MK5 is the first amp to augment analogue inputs with digital ones. This being Rega, it is more the significance of there being inputs at all than the inputs themselves being radical. One optical and one coaxial input are fitted with both offering support for PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz. Decoding comes via an unspecified Wolfson DAC.

This small digital section joins four RCA line inputs and a moving-magnet phono stage, the latter being retained from the previous Elicit-R, making this the largest Rega amp to feature an internal phono stage. The amplifier section benefits from Rega's work developing its Aethos (*HFC* 457) and this is most apparent in the preamp. The new Elicit uses a FET-based circuit with an ALPS potentiometer in place of the microprocessor-controlled system of its predecessor. This means that input selection has been moved to a separate control although, like the Aethos, there is no direct input selection.

The new amp is significantly more powerful than the outgoing model. Rega quotes 105W into 8ohm, rising to 127W into 6 and 162W into 4, making the Aethos significantly more powerful than some key rivals). Power is available to a single set of speaker terminals and a 6.35mm headphone socket. The result is an amplifier that, on paper at least, moves on from its analogue-only predecessor while also changing the dynamic of how you might build a system around it. You could realistically use the phono stage, the coaxial input for something like the iFi ZEN Stream (*HFC* 485) or a CD transport while entrusting your TV to the optical connection – resulting in a complete and modern system.

This makes the Saturn MK3 – the device Rega envisages being partnered with the Elicit MK5 – initially look a little curious. In the Rega tradition, it is a top-loading CD player built around Rega's own mechanism and making use of a pair of Wolfson WM8742 DACs for decoding. This DAC section also supports another five digital inputs: two coaxial, two optical and a single USB-B. The sample rate handling is the same 24-bit/192kHz maximum as the two on the amp, giving you no less than seven across the two devices. The reality is that the inputs on the Saturn MK3 give it flexibility when used with the Aethos or any other amplifier that doesn't have its own digital board – giving it broader

appeal than a regular 'straight' CD player might offer up.

The Elicit MK5 and Saturn MK3 together do look fabulous, though. The trickle down of Rega's new casework and styling cues from the Aethos results in some very attractive Rega products and proportionally these two are arguably even better looking than their sibling. The slight slimming of the casework – identically sized on both units – gives them an elegance when combined that eludes a great deal of

**The Rega duo is effortlessly musical in a way that eludes more expensive rivals**

other equipment. Something I would be careful about – however good it might look – is stacking the two units directly on top of one another. The Elicit MK5 runs warm so I add a set of Quadraspire QPlus Advanced feet (*HFC* 448) under the Saturn MK3 to help ventilate it.

This aside, the Rega duo is entirely confidence inspiring. The build quality of both is excellent and the top-loading mechanism of the Saturn MK3 feels solid and has a little ceremony to use in a way that most tray mechs do not. The Solaris remote that controls both devices is not a work of art, but is reliable and is easy to use. So long as you have the required clear space over the top of the Saturn to open the door, there should be no issues in accommodating them both.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**
Rega Elicit MK5

**ORIGIN**
UK

**TYPE**
Integrated amplifier

**WEIGHT**
12.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
432 x 82 x 340mm

**FEATURES**
- Claimed power output: 2x 105W (8ohm)
- Connections: 4x stereo RCA inputs; MM phono input; optical input; coaxial input
- Record in/out; power amp in

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Rega Research Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**
01702 333071

**WEBSITE**
rega.co.uk

## Sound quality

The novelty of going direct to a Rega amp is too much to ignore and by using an M2Tech USB to SP/Dif converter, it is attached directly to a Roon Nucleus (*HFC* 435). The single most important thing that the Elicit MK5 does from the outset is to show that this digital section might be small, but it is certainly no afterthought. The 24-bit/96kHz stream of Punch Brothers cover of *The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald* is beautifully handled with Chris Thile sounding absolutely convincing; distinct from the beautifully layered instrumentation, all of which has considerable tonal realism and enough energy to be both believable and engaging.

The amp section is still the main star of the show, though, and reading back through my notes on the Aethos, it is impressive how often the smaller amp mimics its bigger brother. That same sense of agility when presented with something energetic like Bloc Party's *Rough Justice* is hugely entertaining. Without flinching from the surprising level of heft that the recording possesses, the Elicit MK5 absolutely dances through the track in a way that makes many rivals feel like disinterested observers. This is helped by the considerable reserves of grunt on tap. It might not be as powerful as the Aethos, but this is still an amp that's likely to be able to drive any remotely price-comparative speaker to well beyond any domestically acceptable volume levels.

The extra functionality is good too. You can reasonably argue that some of Rega's own standalone phono stages might eke a little more performance from the Planar 10 (*HFC* 456) and Vertere Sabre cartridge that serves as a test partner, but it successfully captures the former's glorious and unfettered transparency and the huge reserves of headroom mean that gain is unlikely to be an issue. The headphone amp is also very close to the Aethos in overall performance and is more than up to the job of being used on a regular basis ▶

## CONNECTIONS

1. Moving-magnet phono stage input
2. 4x stereo RCA inputs
3. Record in and outputs
4. Preamp output
5. Optical input
6. Coaxial input

rather than merely a convenience feature that's employed now and again.

Whatever arguments might be made on paper about the Elicit MK5 being a more self-contained device than its predecessors, however, ignore that listening to the two Rega devices together is a lesson in design synergy. The Saturn MK3 is not a radically specified device judged by the standards of 2022, but the way it

**Proportionally these two are arguably even better looking than the Aethos**

performs is a reminder that there are aspects of digital that are more than merely sample rate handling.

Digging out my CD copy of *This Never Ending Now* by The Chameleons, the Saturn MK3 simply delights in how it handles this pared-back version of the band's classics. The highlight is *Swamp Thing*; a world away from its stark eighties ancestor with its warm and involving beauty. The Saturn MK3 is gloriously 'undigital'; a statement that might seem odd given its function, but one that should make complete sense the moment you hear it. Without smoothing off or losing any aspect of the musicianship, it avoids any sense of processing or the slightly 'etched' presentation that some state-of-the-art solutions can deliver.

The Rega is not some soft and woolly relic, though. Switching to the USB input and playing the startlingly dynamic *Simmer* by Hayley Williams reveals that the Saturn MK3 has sensational bass. As well as an impressive level of out-and-out extension, it's the texture and control that it possesses that truly sets it apart. It's this punch and a greater feel of three-dimensional space that allows it to demonstrate an advantage over the digital inputs on the amp. You can listen to the coaxial input of the Elicit MK5 all day and not once feel short changed, but the standalone digital source is an obvious step forward from the very first moment you hear it.

Combine the two and the results are simply outstanding. Listening to Sturgill Simpson's sensational *Cuttin' Grass Volume 1*, the Rega duo is effortlessly musical in a way that eludes even considerably more expensive devices. You can use the power of the Elicit MK5 to set any listening level you fancy (and Q Acoustic's Concept 50 is a gloriously obliging partner in aiding and abetting this behaviour) and then simply let everything flow effortlessly. The gloriously tongue-in-cheek *Long White Line* fizzles with all the energy packed into the recording and, without ever really compromising on the technical accuracy of what you're hearing, the two Rega units see me stop analysing the performance and just sit back and enjoy it instead.

## Conclusion

It's this pleasure that marks these devices out as something special. You can't measure enjoyment and I don't imagine you specifically seek to create it at a design brief level. Nevertheless, across hours of listening to anything I can think of, this pair makes music an emotionally pleasurable experience. You can reasonably argue that these are the most flexible and 'modern' Rega devices yet, but that has been achieved without altering what the company has always done so well. The Elicit MK5 and Saturn MK3 are the perfect embodiment of 2022, but they remain timelessly Rega while they do so ●

**HOW IT COMPARES**

**In the same way that the Aethos is a competitor to the Naim Supernait 3, the Elicit MK5 is a logical competitor to the NAIT XS3 (*HFC* 454). While I prefer the Supernait 3 over the Aethos by a small margin, here it is the other way around. The Elicit MK5 keeps the NAIT XS3 honest in every comparable aspect of their spec (I fractionally prefer the Naim phono stage, but think the Rega's headphone amp is better), but the Rega goes on to offer two digital inputs, which makes it rather more flexible. No less importantly, it is £500 cheaper than the Naim.**

Hi-fi Choice

**SATURN MK3**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★☆

**LIKE:** Effortlessly musical; connectivity; pleasant to use

**DISLIKE:** No DSD; needs to be on the top shelf of stand or rack

**WE SAY:** A supremely talented digital source with appeal well beyond the remit of a Rega system

OVERALL ★★★★★

Hi-fi Choice

**ELICIT MK5**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★½

**LIKE:** Lively, potent and refined sound; spec; build and looks

**DISLIKE:** Runs hot; no direct input selection

**WE SAY:** A brilliant update to the Elicit that delivers more features without changing the same fundamentally enjoyable performance

OVERALL ★★★★★

**High-quality relays, Sanken output transistors, discrete circuitry, and polypropylene capacitors are used throughout the amp design**

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

# Premier league

## Rotel's flagship amp from its main separates range owes much of its thinking to something more special says ***Ed Selley***

Say 'Rotel' to any hi-fi enthusiast and the definition that results usually centres around a no-nonsense, engineering-led theme. A brief look at the RA-1592MKII, the largest integrated amp in the range, doesn't necessarily do much to change these perceptions. As the name suggests, it is an overhaul of the preceding RA-1592 (*HFC* 459) and is the largest amp in its standard range.

Revision or not, the spec of this update is extremely comprehensive, even judged at the price. Like a great many integrateds hitting the market, this is most of the way to being an all-in-one system. In conventional analogue terms, it has a single XLR input supported by three RCAs and a moving-magnet phono stage. These are complemented by preouts both for connecting a power amplifier (of which Rotel still makes a healthy selection) and subwoofers.

The analogue connections are supported by a digital board, which gives you three optical, three coaxial and a USB-B input supported by Bluetooth with aptX and AAC support. This digital board is relatively unusual in that it uses a Texas Instruments DAC for decoding rather than an ESS or AKM one. The sample rate handling is fairly comprehensive with PCM up to 384kHz supported by the USB input, but there is no native DSD handling, which may or may not be important to you. It is MQA compatible, however.

Even without network connectivity or an HDMI ARC connection (some similarly priced rivals have both), the Rotel is well specified. These connections are made available via a rotary encoder-equipped preamp to a power amp section that is one of the most powerful options available at this sort of price point. Using a Class A/B design, Rotel claims 200W into 8ohm, which rises to 350W into 4 – which should be enough to drive pretty much any speaker. In keeping with all Rotel designs, a significant proportion of the internals have been designed and manufactured in-house.

**The Rotel brings order and control to even the most large scale of recordings**

This amplification is made available to two independently switched sets of speaker terminals and a headphone socket; with a 3.5mm connection rather than the more commonly encountered 6.35mm one. All this comes encased in a large but well-made chassis that probably warrants the term 'no-nonsense'.

Each input can be directly selected from the front panel and the remote (which does contribute to the handset being something of a button fest), the display is reasonably easy to read and the various setup options are simple enough to select and cycle through. You might justifiably argue that more exciting design is available for similar money, but this is a very easy amp to use day to day, with little in the way of quirks. I'd hesitate to describe it as attractive, but there's a certain purposefulness to its aesthetic.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**
Rotel RA-1592MKII

**ORIGIN**
Japan/China

**TYPE**
Integrated amplifier

**WEIGHT**
17.6kg

**DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
431 x 144 x 425mm

**FEATURES**
- Quoted output power: 200W per channel (8ohm)
- 3x RCA line inputs; XLR input; moving-magnet phono stage
- Digital board inputs: USB; 3x coaxial; 3x optical

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Rotel Europe

**TELEPHONE**
01903 221710

**WEBSITE**
rotel.com

## Sound quality

Worthy of note is that the power figures and general layout suggest certain similarities with the Michi X3 (*HFC* 475); the smallest member of the Michi range. The RA-1592MKII has a simplified DAC section and does without the beautiful casework and remote of its more expensive sibling, but there does seem to be a degree of specification overlap, which is impressive considering the £2,000 price disparity.

The perception of similarities doesn't end with the specification either. The RA-1592MKII has a number of things in common with its bigger brother and key among these is an effortless heft that is hard not to be very impressed by. The Rotel leverages its considerable power output to bring order and control to

even the most large scale of recordings. The vastness of Hans Zimmer's *Dune* score often challenges even very accomplished amps. Here it is delivered with every fragment of its power and scale intact.

The nature of how this scale is recreated is an impressive dovetailing of bass extension and soundstage. The RA-1592MKII has sensational heft; a heady combination of depth, detail and control. It takes our resident Focal Kanta (*HFC* 454) and extracts a little extra low-end shove without affecting its superb overall tonal balance. The stereo image it creates effortlessly extends beyond the speaker position and feels immersive without tripping over into being diffuse. The Michi X3 has long departed, but looking at my notes, these qualities are present in both.

There are differences, though. The Texas Instruments DAC results in a darker and more forceful

**The attention that Rotel devotes to its amplifiers is clearly on display here**

presentation than the Michi. This is something that can be beneficial. The manner in which the Rotel digs into the propulsive *Vanities* by WH Lung is tremendously engaging. The timing and drive are complemented by a midrange that is detailed and manages to be refined without tipping over into being dull. With the less ballistic and sublimely recorded *Blue Heron Suite* by Sarah Jarosz, the result can sound a little lacking in sparkle and warmth compared with both its bigger brother and some more equivalently priced competition. This is something that could probably be largely addressed with prudent speaker choice, although some rivals walk this balance better.

Something else the RA-1592MKII has in common with the Michi is also less of an advantage. The phono stage is good rather than great so if you plan on using vinyl a great deal it might be best to look at a standalone model. Connected to a Rega Planar 10 (*HFC* 456) and Vertere Sabre combination, the slightly limited gain isn't really an issue on account of the biblical reserves of power, but the slightly flat and lifeless presentation is harder to address and even a sublime pressing like Dead Can Dance's *Dionysus* never really comes alive via the Rotel.

Some other aspects of the extended functionality are much better, though. The headphone amp is more than up to the job of obtaining respectable performance from £500-£600 headphones and the Bluetooth is very effectively implemented too. Listening via aptX is a genuinely audiophile experience.

**HOW IT COMPARES**

**Cyrus' i7-XR (*HFC* 473) is a very similar price. The Rotel can drive speakers that the Cyrus struggles with. It has more connections and in larger spaces its sheer three dimensionality will probably win many people over. In smaller spaces things are not so clear cut. For starters, the Cyrus takes up less space. If you are driving more sensitive speakers, the i7-XR can match the fluency (if not the space and heft) of the Rotel, but it has a sweeter top end via its digital inputs and a better phono stage. It's a keenly fought contest, but for me the Cyrus is a fractionally better amplifier.**

**The MM phono stage is good rather than great**

**The range of connections on offer makes this more like an all-in-one than an amplifier**

## Conclusion

Simply labelling the RA-1592MKII as a Michi X3 in a simpler box is incorrect and does rather diminish the qualities of the X3. Describing the more affordable amplifier as delivering some of the aspects of the Michi listening experience is rather more accurate. The care and attention that Rotel devotes to its amplifiers is clearly on display here. This is an effortlessly powerful device that allows an extensive and well-thought out selection of inputs to be used in an entirely straightforward and user-friendly way. The RA-1592MKII isn't perfect, but it is sufficiently impressive across enough of its functionality to be something you should seek out if you are shopping for an amp at this price point ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

## OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

**LIKE:** Powerful and spacious sound; connectivity; build

**DISLIKE:** Can sound a little dark; limited phono stage

**WE SAY:** A flexible and powerful amp with many engaging features. Not perfect, but certainly talented

OVERALL ★★★★½

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ENTERPRISE REVIEW

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**– Stereophile (USA)**

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Best Analogue Product Award
**– Fedeltà Del Suono” (Italy)**

“The value of this arm is off the scale”
**– John Stratton (Owner)**

## ENTERPRISE TONEARM

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## SILVER TONEARM

Most Wanted Component Award
“So far ahead of the pack... looks about to lap them... first choice for those looking for ultra musical LP performance.”
**– Stereo Times**

Best of Year Award
“The Origin Live Silver tonearm is phenomenal and makes me realize what a bargain it truly is at its asking price.”
**– 6 Moons**

“Design of the decade.”
**– HI FI World**

## CONQUEROR TONEARM

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**– HI FI World**

Most wanted component award
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**– Klangbilder (Vienna)**

Perfect 10 award
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**– Audio 10 (USA)**

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# Hi-fi choices

YOUR LETTERS & QUESTIONS ANSWERED

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## THIS MONTH

**ED SELLEY**

**EXPERTISE: REVIEWER**

Active in the industry since 1999, Ed's first record was *Boss Drum* by The Shamen. He splits his time between reviewing and protecting hi-fi kit from his son Will.

**NEVILLE ROBERTS**

**EXPERTISE: ENGINEER**

Neville has an eclectic taste for classical baroque and jazz. His wife was forced to marry his transmission line speakers in the eighties and he collects BBC test card music.

**JASON KENNEDY**

**EXPERTISE: REVIEWER**

Editor of *HFC* from 1998 to 2001, Jason's first turntable was Rega's Planar 3 and Elvis' *40 Greatest Hits* was his first vinyl, so don't go stepping on his blue suede shoes.

**DAVID PRICE**

**EXPERTISE: REVIEWER**

DP two-finger typed his first hi-fi review 25 years ago. Since then he's edited *Hi-Fi World* and *HFC*. He describes himself as an "unreconstructed analogue addict".

**CHRIS WARD**

**EXPERTISE: REVIEWER**

Like his first kiss, Chris will never forget the sound of his first amp – an Aura Evolution VA-100. *War Of The Worlds* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* were his first records.

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## Fully armed

**I have a Michell GyroDec, black and bronze full version, with GyroPower PSU. I would like a new arm for this, one with a removeable SME-type headshell, so I can easily swap cartridges. Can you suggest a reasonably priced one of this type? I've looked around and not had any luck finding a suitable one.**

**I thought that a Jelco SA-750 would be ideal, but it doesn't seem to be available any more. I've also explored an SME 309, but it's just too expensive.**

**A used arm in good condition would be okay. My current arm is a Rega RB250 with Origin Live stub mods, which is fine but it is not easy to change the cartridge.**

***Rob, by email***

***DP:*** If you can live without the detachable functionality Rob, my choice would be the Audiomods Six tonearm (£1,085), which to my ears is one of the huge audiophile bargains of the moment. It's beautifully made to order by designer Jeff Spall and has a sweetness and a smoothness that no Rega derivative that I have heard matches. Otherwise, if you must go 'detachable headshell', then you're looking at a Jelco or derivative, or indeed a used SME 309, SME 3009S2, SME Series III or Rega R200. The latter (rewired) is what I use in my Gyro, when I need to swap cartridges in short order. Sadly, the audiophile market seems to have left behind the notion of detachable headshell tonearms, because buyers now seem to prioritise absolute sound quality over convenience.

**Audio Origami's handmade PU7 might just fit the bill for Rob**

***ES:*** The recent change to the tonearm market has seriously impeded your choice for removable headshell arms. When Jelco stopped production, it also meant that Ortofon and a few other branded arms decided to call it a day as well and with SME not selling arms on its own, that was the end of that avenue as well. A search online reveals very little for sale, but the Sorane TA-1 looks like it would work and follows the same basic pattern as the Jelco arms did.

***CW:*** A tricky brief, I'm minded to recommend a pre-loved SME3009 arm. This retro solution will give you the flexibility to swap headshells. With a knife-edge bearing, the arm won't be quite as sophisticated as a modern alternative, but can still hold it's own when well set up with a well-matched cartridge. Another slightly lateral solution to consider might be a second arm. All removable headshells can be considered an engineering compromise as they need to affect a vital, delicate electrical and mechanical connection right at the business end of a tonearm. You could just get another Rega tonearm with an alternative cartridge and become adept at swapping and setting up tonearms and carefully storing the spare.

***NR:*** Alas, the Jelco SA750 is no longer manufactured, so a good used arm will be a great option. Also consider a used ISOkinetik Silver Melody 750 (*HFC* 385), if you can find one, as that was ▶

## WE ASKED...

**Do you own wireless loudspeakers?**

- Yes, I love them
- No, they're not for me
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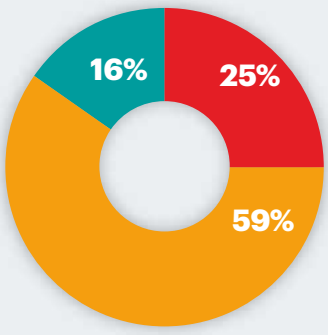


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Malcolm is struggling to get the best resolution from his Rotel T14

made by Jelco for ISOkinetic and was based on a Jelco SA750, but upgraded with silver wire and a higher specification. As for a new option, you might like to consider an Audio Origami PU7, which is a wonderful handmade arm that sounds fantastic.

## Take it higher

**I have added Rotel's T14 tuner/streamer to my Arcam A85/P85/Bowers and Wilkins 603 MKII system. I'm using the DTS Play-Fi app on my iPhone 6 to stream music from Amazon Unlimited. I have set hi-res and am streaming Ultra HD music files at 24-bit/48kHz and it sounds very good, but if I try to set the quality higher (ie 24-bit/96kHz or 24-bit/192kHz) the sound stops although the file still appears to be streaming. Is there any way to raise and hear the higher two resolutions? Many thanks.**

***Malcolm Costley, by email***

***ES:*** Hi Malcolm, can you check to make sure you have the 'Critical Listening' function selected in Play-Fi? Without it, it can get a little unhappy about higher sample rates. As this is free, it is by far the quickest thing to check before any part of your wireless hardware comes under any scrutiny.

***NR:*** This may be a problem with your local wi-fi network – are your Rotel T14 and iPhone 6 close to your router? It might be good to measure your wi-fi signal strength where you listen to music. I use a nifty little Android app called Wi-Fi Analyser and it displays a nice graph of the signal strengths of all signals (including my neighbours'). Make sure your neighbours' routers are not overlapping the wi-fi from your router. Most routers auto-select the wi-fi channel, but I have mine set to Channel 1 manually as that seems to avoid my neighbours' signals. Failing that, you might need to invest in a wi-fi repeater near your audio system.

## Totally wired

**I am confused by your review of 'wireless' loudspeakers in the May issue. As you point out, each speaker still needs a wire for power and the reviewer describes the need to 'set up' each speaker with an app. I've never needed to 'set up' any pair of conventional loudspeakers; how has setting up suddenly crept in? Or do these speakers contain their own amplifiers? If so, what is the source that drives the amplifier? And does the source (even if a stream from the internet) require its own wire connection?**

**I'd also like to point out that any loudspeaker receiving radio waves as its source must have an input inferior to the same loudspeaker receiving a cabled input, since radio waves can suffer interference and cables cannot (in most practical senses). All very confusing...**

***John White, by email***

## What is the point of wireless speakers if they still need a wire to get power?

***ES:*** Anything listed as a wireless speaker is going to have its own amplification and need power. There is generally setup involved to get one up and running (although, being pedantic, a pair of passive speakers will need connections to be made and at least cursory attention paid to their positioning too).

As you correctly note, these devices are not necessarily going to be in the same performance ballpark as more conventional options (although, split the budget to include amplification and source and you might be surprised to what the gap drops to), but that isn't the whole point. Some years ago, I helped my Father change from an old ▶

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The first phonostage from Rothwell was unveiled back in 1990. In those days even the concept of an outboard phonostage was unknown to most audiophiles, though of course it's commonplace now. There were very few, if any, on the market then, and the first Rothwell phonostage was well ahead of its time. It was a valve design with a separate and substantial power supply, and it had adjustable load resistance and capacitance – ideas which were adopted only years later by others. 30 years on, Rothwell phonostages are still different from the many me-too offerings. All the designs, from entry-level to the top-of-the-range, are totally discrete transistor circuits without any op-amps at all, and they're all still made in the UK.
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Thanks to Doug Brady Hi-fi for their continuing support and for the use of their dem room featured in the picture.

Wireless speakers are best suited to streaming music over wi-fi

but very capable separates system to a Naim Mu-So 2nd Generation. Objectively, the Naim is not as good, but the simplicity of its operation (and the fact it boosts the television sound as well via HDMI) means it has seen more use in the last two and half years than the separates system did in the previous ten. As a publication, we're committed to the enjoyment of music and these products more than earn their place in the options we cover.

***JK:*** As Ed notes, wireless speakers require a wire to power them, but it only needs to go to the nearest plug socket. As for a source, as a rule these speakers are designed to stream directly from the internet via wi-fi, which is where the app comes in – essentially as a means of selecting and controlling what's being played. Many have inputs for a line source such as a CD player or phono stage from a turntable, but this would of course require a connection to said device. The set up element is essentially putting them on the network so that you can stream to them as described. That said, all speakers need to be placed carefully if you want to get optimal sound quality so you have probably set up speakers without knowing it in the past.

***NR:*** As you correctly note, wireless speakers have their own internal amplifiers as you cannot transmit enough power through the ether to power loudspeaker drivers – well, not safely anyway! Some speakers also incorporate DSPs (digital signal processors) to allow you to tune them to suit your room. It's these settings, along with the volume, that can be controlled via an app on a smartphone or tablet. Modern digital wireless transmission systems for audio applications can transmit audio in a surprisingly good quality – certainly good enough for bookshelf-sized wireless speakers. When you bear in mind that the BBC originally invented NICAM in the Seventies as a way of transmitting high-quality stereo FM radio digitally between transmitters, you can appreciate why it was then used for the first transmissions of stereo TV sound to the public in the Eighties. Digital transmission protocols can effectively overcome the interference issues that you mention. Wireless speakers can connect to your source material via a dedicated wireless transmitter/receiver combination or via your home wi-fi, which can also transmit high-definition video to your TV, so there is plenty of bandwidth available for audio.

## My speakers' sound improved after my wife put a Christmas tree in front of them

### Tried and tested

**I have a tried-and-tested way regarding upgrades in all equipment and accessories I've made. I have many CDs – good and not so good quality – and it's the poor recordings I use for testing. If a bad CD can all of a sudden be listenable and enjoyed after the upgrade, I know a clear difference has been made. I then play discs of good quality and listen for the differences... Good or bad.**

**My other half played a big part in my latest upgrade by placing a Christmas tree three feet from one of my speakers. After I called her all sorts and told her it was not staying there, I decided to try and calm myself down by playing some music. I very quickly noticed that the sound had improved. Imaging,**


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**After this, I got in touch with Jordan Acoustics, Bournemouth, and spoke with Tim and Dave regarding a home demo of the McIntosh MEN220 room correction. Their customer service before, during and after the purchases was second to none. A true credit to the industry and themselves.**

**As for the McIntosh, what an amazing piece of kit! £6,800 ain't cheap, but no matter what type of recording or music I play it sounds incredible and so much fun. I'd highly recommend a home demo.**

**One last thing, to all the music lovers and audiophiles out there: we need to support our bricks-and-mortar stores and not waste their time by having in-store demos and then going off and buying online because it's cheaper.**

**Jordan Acoustics is a round trip of over 200 miles for me and its worth every mile to give them my business.**

***Darren Beard, by email***

***CW:*** I'm really heartened and pleased that you've discovered the importance of 'the room' Darren. It's still the last piece of hi-fi equipment that people focus on, yet it's arguably the most important component affecting the quality of your system. I wish more manufacturers were able to support their dealers in extended home trials of fully run-in components to enable their customers to hear what will work perfectly in their own spaces.

***JK:*** It's good to know that top-notch customer service is not a thing of the past. Your assessment technique sounds like a solid one to me, after all it's easy to make a great recording sound good, but much more of a challenge to make a lesser one enjoyable. I play some more difficult music when reviewing and it's very revealing of a system's all-round coherency and timing.

***ES:*** Room correction optimisation is a 'final frontier' of audio that is poised to be a very big deal… if we can overcome some of the hang ups we have around it. Something that hasn't helped is that reviewers, by and large, work in well-behaved rooms with optimal speaker placement, which means that when sent devices with room optimisation on board the effects are often not as pronounced as they will be in a normal domestic space. As you note, it's at this point that good dealers come in and if you have access to people like Jordan Acoustics, devices like the McIntosh are going to be things you can practically experiment with and reap the benefits of.

**We need to support our bricks-and-mortar hi-fi dealers as much as possible**

***NR:*** I totally agree about the need to audition equipment before purchase, and the only way to do that is by visiting audio retailers, where you can listen and compare much more easily.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

## Grand challenge

**I've been reading your magazine for 10 years now and have used it to fantasise about the high-end kit that will one day fill my listening room. However, last year I finally realised that having thousands in spare cash for hi-fi may be an indefinite wait. So, I set myself the challenge of pulling together**

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**a system of mainly vintage elements to see how much bang I could get for my buck with a budget of less than £1,000.**

**I now have a mint Luxman L85-V amplifier (1977), some mint Yamaha NS625 speakers (1977) and an iFi ZEN Blue V2 streaming DAC (2021) with AudioQuest Goldengate/AudioQuest Rockett 11 cables. Not only have I thoroughly enjoyed researching and assembling this setup, the joy it brings through its sound is something that I wish I had bitten the bullet earlier for. Why was I waiting to be able to afford perfection when I could get a decent chunk of it and some beautiful retro kit for a fraction of the price?**

**What do you think should be my next move? I'd love to upgrade the Yamahas to NS1000Ms, but I'm also considering going for a Chord Mojo 2 in the interim to beef up the detail and soundstage first. Any thoughts or guidance would be gratefully received.**

***Barry Adley, West Sussex***

***CW:*** I'm with you, Barry. Hi-fi can be a love that resides too much in the imagination. Waiting for the next incredible product launch will always stop you committing to the lovely components here right now. And turning back the clock to look for epic products from yesteryear means that you can assemble a superb system on a modest budget. I once planned to launch a hi-fi show called 'A Grand Day Out' where people exactly like you would showcase and play systems put together for less than £1,000. I'm still up for it if readers give me some positive feedback. Really, it's no different to car enthusiasts rightly having pride in keeping glorious usable classics on the road. If (like DP) you love the speed and insight of Beryllium-powered Yamaha loudspeakers, the NS1000M could be for you – but be careful as too much of a good thing could disrupt the lovely balance you've got right now.

***NR:*** I have to say that your extremely well put-together system is lacking a very important component – a record deck! Your Luxman L85-V has no less than two MM phono inputs and to get the best sound from your system I would recommend investing in a turntable with a good moving-magnet cartridge, such as one from the Ortofon 2M range. There is a plethora of great 'pre-loved' record decks available to buy these days and I'm sure you can find one that will suit your budget. You should certainly consider that for your next move.

***JK:*** I suspect that you will have rather more luck with the aims stated if you upgrade the amplifier. I appreciate that the Luxman is a classic, but amplifier technology has moved on quite significantly since it was made. If your budget will stretch to it I would suggest the Rega Elex-R (*HFC* 420) is worth listening to as it will do more of everything compared with the Luxman and has the luxury of remote control if not the style of that machine.

***ES:*** It's hard to make a fully qualified statement on items made before I was born, but if the NS-1000M's distinctive presentation is what you're looking for a tidy used pair should offer enormous bang for your buck. The performance difference between the ZEN Blue and the Mojo 2 is perceivable, but you will be going from one well-sorted digital source to another and my suspicion is that it won't be as big a difference as the speakers will be; with the previous proviso that the NS-1000M is an acquired taste – one I've never truly acquired myself!

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# Musical stupidity

Innovations in music have often been met with criticism, only to be considered strokes of genius by later generations. ***Neville Roberts*** wonders if critics were just being stupid

These days, the musical compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) are rightly recognised as pivotal in the evolution of classical music, but his originality was not acknowledged in his lifetime. Bach disdained the rules that others played by and often flouted authority. He was also insolent to his students and all this behaviour resulted in him being branded as incorrigible by the councillors in Leipzig, who documented chains of offences that he committed during his employment. But it was his stubborn attitude that enabled him to make the radical changes in composition that we have now come to respect.

Fellow composer Johann Adolphe Scheibe called his performances confused and bombastic and said that Bach's music was marred by an unending mass of metaphors and figures. As it turned out, for succeeding generations these were the signs of Bach's greatness. Does all this mean that the music critics at the time lacked musical understanding, or were they just plain stupid?

I happened to come across an interesting article that was published online at psyche.co called: 'Why some of the smartest people can be so very stupid'. The article was written by Sacha Golob, a reader in philosophy at King's College London and co-director of the Centre for Philosophy and Visual Arts (CPVA), who has published extensively on modern French and German philosophy and the philosophy of art. His article is an incisive and concise examination of the issue. In the opening paragraph of his publication, Golob refers to a lecture entitled 'On Stupidity' given by Austrian novelist Robert Musil in 1937, which was a few years before Musil died. At the heart of Musil's lecture was the idea that stupidity was not mere 'dumbness', ie a lack of processing power. Dumbness, for Musil, was 'straightforward', indeed almost 'honourable'. Stupidity, on the other hand, was something very different and much more dangerous, because some of the smartest people – the least dumb – were often the most stupid. Golob believes that Musil's attitude to 'honourable' dumbness can actually be dangerously complacent and points to the case of COVID-19 denial and the anti-vaccination movement. Goleb says that dumbness alone is rarely the driving threat, and at the head of almost every dumb movement, you will find stupidity in charge.

**At first I found Philip Glass' *Knee Play 3* silly, but I must confess I like it now**

Few critics are immune to what Golob terms 'stupidity'. We all make stupid remarks at some time or another, and often it is so-called experts who make some of the most senseless comments. Golob claims that stupidity is a very specific cognitive failing and occurs when you don't have the right conceptual tools for the job. He considers that this results in an inability to make sense of what is happening, and the resulting tendency is to force phenomena into crude and distorted pigeonholes. In other words, if throughout our lives we have always seen cows that are black and white, we assume something is amiss if we encounter a brown one. Looking back at Bach's music, the critics of the time tried to force his 'new' music into categories they were familiar with, but it didn't fit. Hence, his music must be bad because it didn't fit within their experiences and comfort zones.

**It's important to not turn your nose up at music innovations and to try and keep an open mind**

## Change of heart

I can be just as bad. Sometimes, on hearing a new piece of music, I dismiss it as rubbish. When I first heard *Knee Play 3* from Philip Glass' *Einstein On The Beach*, I thought it was silly, to say the least. It is Glass' first and longest opera score, taking approximately five hours in full performance without intermission (but the audience is permitted to enter and leave as desired). *Knee Play 3* largely consists of a choir singing "one-two-three-four" rapidly and repeatedly in quick succession. However, I did find it strangely compelling and having heard it a few times, I must confess that I now quite like it. This has shown me that I need to keep a more open mind when it comes to music. After all, as the old saying goes: they don't write numbers like that any more! ●

**NEVILLE ROBERTS**
Open minded

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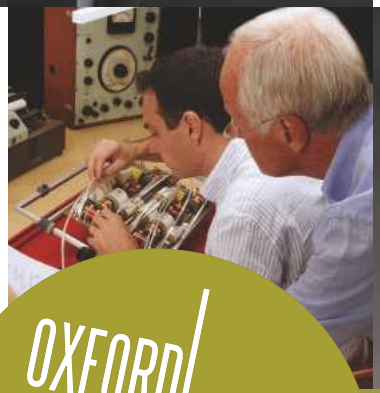

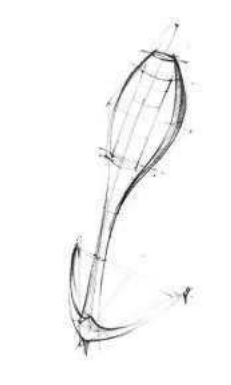

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# Icons and avatars

It wasn't so long ago that ***Nigel Williamson*** suggested that the grip of nostalgia for the Sixties and Seventies was at last starting to wane. Turns out he was wrong

A couple of stories over the last few weeks have highlighted just how wrong I was about the power of the old rock gods starting to wane. First came the news that Bob Dylan has re-recorded some of his most famous numbers. Of course, he has been recycling and reworking his old songs for decades on stage, but this is different because for the first time he has: "revisited a personally chosen set of his iconic songs" in pristine new studio recordings.

Dylan has re-recorded his old material to showcase a new ultra-high-fidelity medium called Ionic Originals – a kind of high-class demo record to help sell the new hardware that will be required to play the new aluminium discs, which it is claimed: "advance the art of recorded sound and mark the first breakthrough in analogue sound reproduction in more than 70 years."

The project is helmed by producer T-Bone Burnett and his company, Neo Fidelity Inc. Quite how Burnett's Ionic Originals will exceed the fidelity of vinyl is unclear, but he insists the technology will do nothing less than: "reset the valuation for recorded music." That's some claim.

There is no launch date yet and we look forward to road testing the discs when they appear. It also seems the Dylan release will be followed by other re-recorded classics by artists of similar vintage, captured in: "futureproof pinnacle of recorded sound" before the old gods depart forever. Yet one cannot help thinking that if the 74-year-old Burnett is right and his technology does represent a new gold standard, it might be better employed recording new music rather than a croaky-voiced octogenarian churning out *Blowin' In The Wind* for the umpteenth time.

**The avatar concept could forever change the way we consume live music**

The other big story concerns the new show by Abba, some 40 years after the Swedish quartet – combined age 300 – broke up. Except that they won't be reuniting on stage in person. We've had the juke-box musical and the film. Now we get the avatars, or rather 'ABBAtars' as the, "motion-capture digital representations" of Benny, Björn, Agnetha and Frida's younger selves have been dubbed.

Created by George Lucas' visual effects company and accompanied by a 10-piece live band, by the time you read this the ABBAtars will have taken to the stage performing all the old songs in what's being described as a: "360° concert experience" called ABBA Voyage at the custom-built, 3,000-seater ABBA Arena in London's Olympic Park. With multiple shows per week, it's booking all the way through to December, by which time more than half a million people will have paid to see it.

**What next? Prince jamming with Freddie while Nina and Aretha provide backing vocals?**

We will dance, we will jive. But will we have the time of our lives? I shall be there on the press night and will endeavour to report back, but I have to say that the whole concept makes me feel distinctly uneasy. If it is a success – and there is every indication that it will be for the best tickets are already booked through to September – it could forever change the nature of how we consume 'live' music.

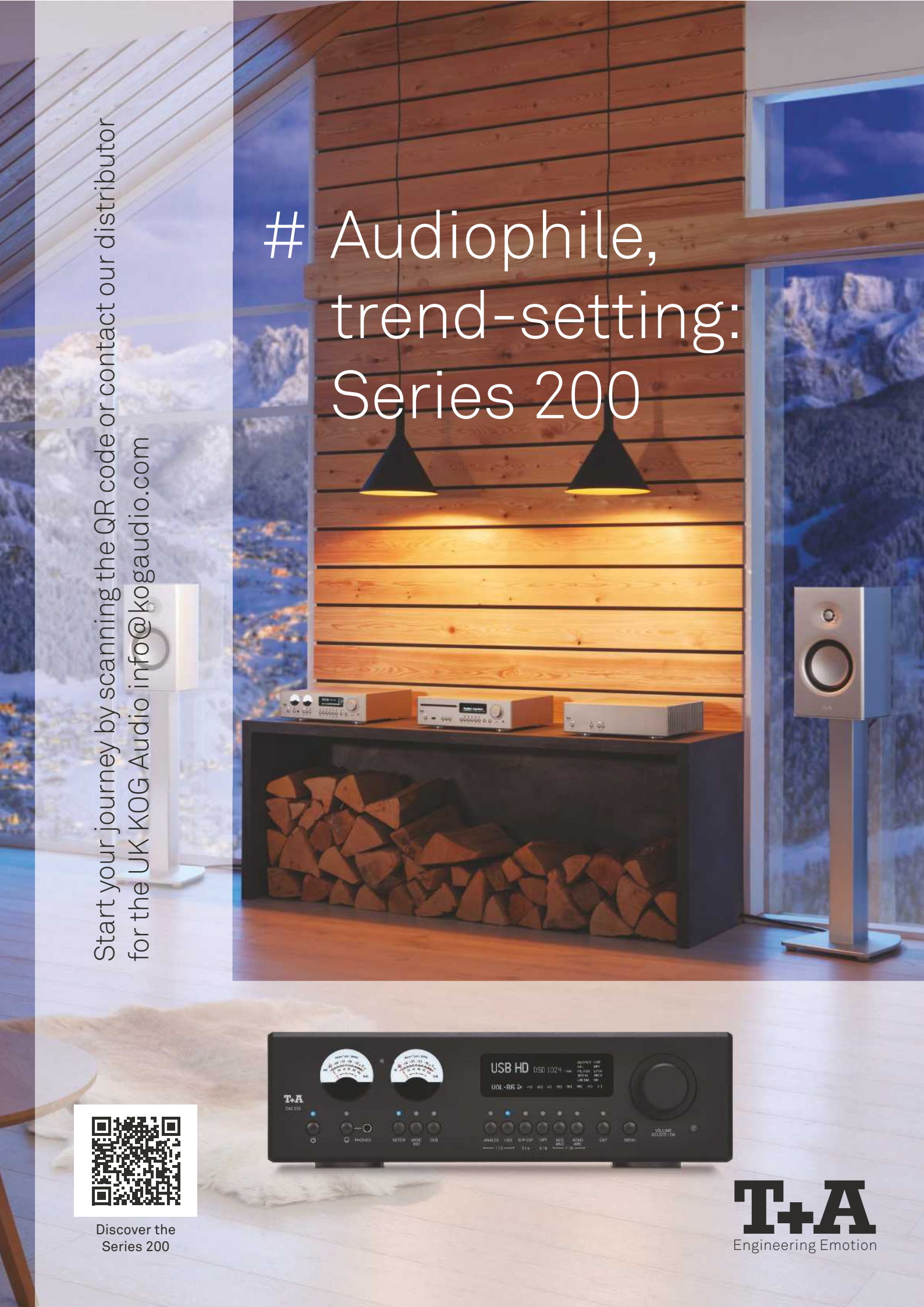
In an avatar world there is no reason why Abba should not be on stage in every capital city in the world simultaneously and the next obvious act to be recreated by George Lucas's visual effects would be The Beatles in all the screaming glory of their fab 1964 iteration.

## You can get some satisfaction

Miraculously, the Rolling Stones – the flesh and blood ones – are still on tour as we speak. But why would you want to go and see a 78-year-old Jagger huffing and puffing his way around the stage when you could have an avatar of him singing *Satisfaction* as a twenty-something, with the added bonus of the late Charlie Watts behind him on the drum kit and Brian Jones on rhythm guitar?

And to bring these two stories back together, what about Dylan, who for the past 30 years has been on a so-called 'never ending tour', with only a brief pause during lockdown? You always assumed that one day it would have to end. But now it seems Bob himself is entirely dispensable and the tour could carry on for a never-ending eternity without him… ●

**NIGEL WILLIAMSON**
In the flesh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# Read all about it!

***Steve Sutherland*** thumbs through the pages of the latest memoirs produced by musicians to recommend some cool summertime reading

One of the only upsides to last year's COVID-19 lockdowns, crazy as that sounds, was that it seems to have given a bunch of popular musicians pause for thought. Unable to tour or meet together to record in studios, the enforced hiatus appears to have encouraged, and in a few cases forced, some of these hyperactive individuals to pour their talents into the printed word. The result of this is a sudden, welcome glut of juicy memoirs for us to feast upon.

So I thought it would be fun to recommend a few books published this year, which you might want to stash in your suitcase or load on your Kindle to enjoy on your Spanish sun lounger or deck chair in Brighton.

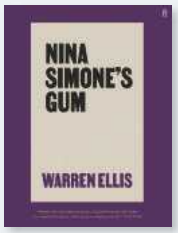
First up there's Vashti Bunyan's *Wayward, Just Another Life To Live* (White Rabbit, £16.99), a simply written and amazingly unsentimental account of how she was chosen for – and failed to make it as – Andrew Loog Oldham's Marianne Faithfull substitute. Disillusioned with the Sixties music biz, she literally hitched a horse to a wagon and took to the road, leading the archetypal hippie life en route from London to Donovan's commune in Scotland. She did, however, find time to record one LP, *Just Another Diamond Day*, under the aegis of folk maestro Joe Boyd and although it sold just about zero copies at the time, it became a sought-after treasure in the recent-ish freak folk scene headed up by Devendra Banhart and decades later, she resurrected her career. *Wayward* charts that incredible journey rather beautifully.

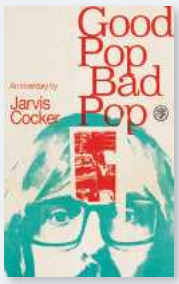
**Duerden reveals what it's like to fall from fame back to grey mundanity**

Another absolutely marvellous read is *Nina Simone's Gum* by Warren Ellis, a magical thing all about obsession, superstition and how we fetishise mementos that grow in meaning. Ellis is Nick Cave's faithful sidekick, and a devotee of Nina Simone whose chewed lump of chewing gum he crept up and stole from the stage after she'd played the Cave-curated Meltdown Festival on the Southbank in 1999. The book documents how the gum became a religious relic and talisman for Ellis through the ups and downs of the ensuing years and makes for a mad and deeply emotional read.

*Good Pop Bad Pop* (Jonathan Cape, £20) is referred to on its cover as an "inventory" by Jarvis Cocker and its tagline is: "This is not a life story. It's a loft story," so it's as eccentric as you'd expect from Pulp's flashy lead geezer, full of thoughts and reminisces inspired by the many and varied objects he found while clearing out his loft. Insightful and delightful.

Bob Stanley's *Let's Do It, The Birth Of Pop* (Faber, £16.99) is the prequel to his splendidly readable encyclopaedic history of modern music, *Yeah Yeah Yeah*. At over 600 pages, it's a bit hefty for the beach perhaps, but you're certainly in good hands with St. Etienne's Bob who walks us thrillingly through the pre-pop years of Bing Crosby, Brenda Lee, Anthony Newley, Scott Joplin, Duke Ellington *etc*. in a chatty style that will send you scuttling to Spotify or wherever to check out the treasure trove of tunes that you never knew you needed to hear. It's a musical history lesson and an utter joy.

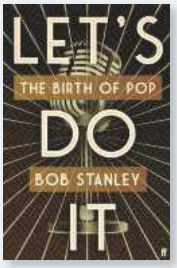


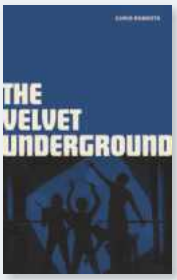



## All tomorrow's parties

Chris Roberts isn't a pop star, but he once tried to be with a band called Catwalk. He is, however, an exceptional journalist and his book *The Velvet Underground* (Palazzo, £14.99), though a slender piece at just 190 pages, is a romp through the career of one of the most influential bands ever. It's based partly on Chris having interviewed Lou Reed on three occasions and once sat by accident on Nico's coat. Clever and funny.

Finally, for those fascinated by the hidden downside of showbiz, there's *Exit Stage Left* by another journo, Nick Duerden (Headline, £20). Subtitled *The Curious Afterlife Of Pop Stars*, it goes where few have dared to venture before in tracking down all those one hit wonders and coulda'-been-a-contenders (hi Musical Youth, Boo Radleys, Echobelly, Frankie Goes To Hollywood *etc*.) to discover what it's like to fall from the glare of fame back to everyday grey mundanity. We meet an expert in ladder safety and a funeral celebrant among those trying to hang on in there. It's a chastening read, but there are resilient troupers too that encourage us all to keep our hopes high and carry on dreaming ●



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The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars (50th Anniversary)

# Musicreviews

ALBUM OF THE MONTH

## Angel Olsen
Big Time

★★★★★ *CD* **Jagjaguwar**

**BORN IN ST** Louis, Missouri 35 years ago and adopted at birth, Olsen began singing in a punk band in her teens before moving to Chicago, where she became a backing singer for Will Oldham, whose albums as Bonnie Prince Billy have made him pretty much the liege lord of alt-folk. Her own folkish solo debut *Half Way Home* came a decade ago and she followed in 2014 with her first full-band record, *Burn Your Fire For No Witness*.

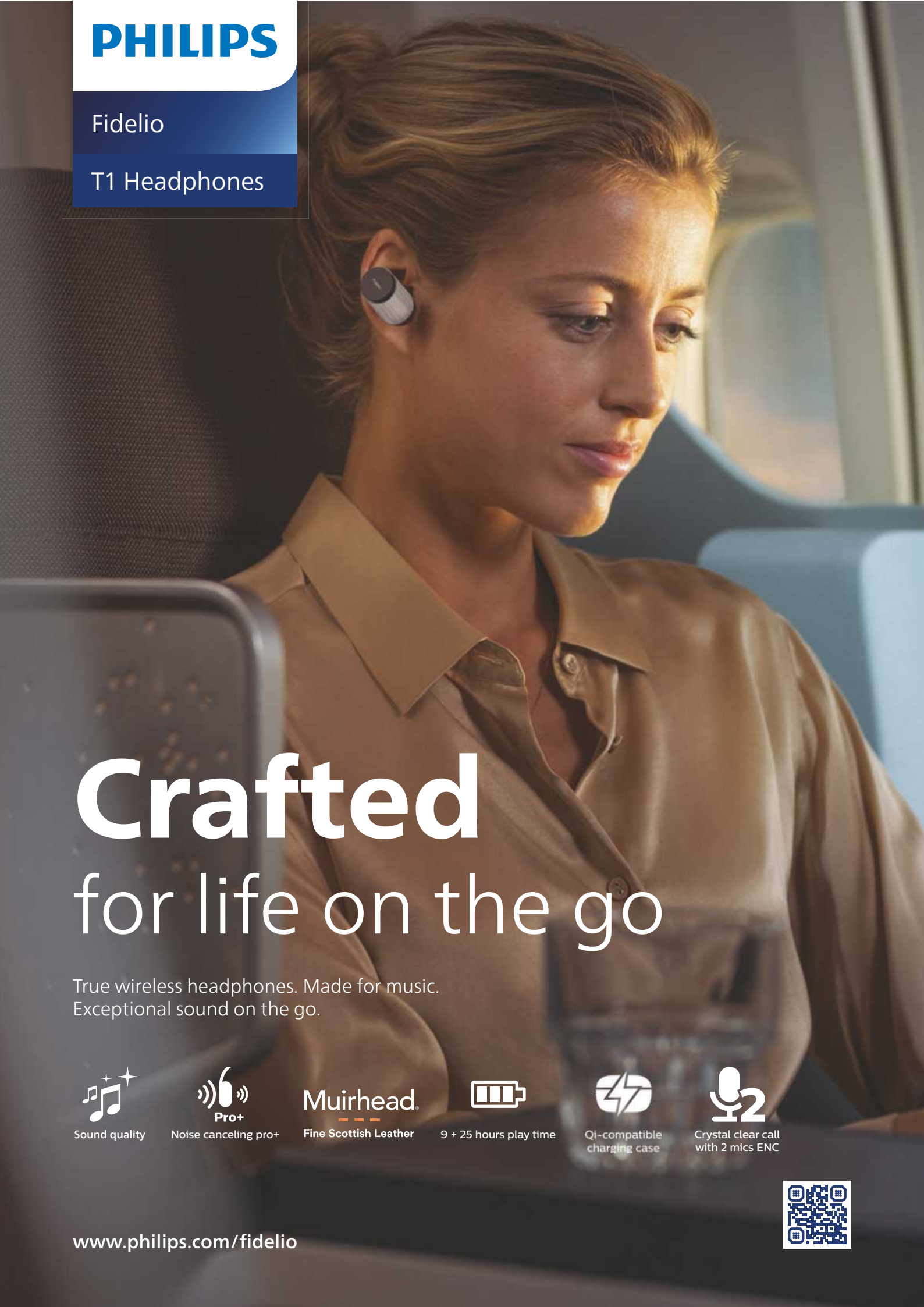
In an era when pop careers can go stratospheric on the strength of one viral track, Olsen is one of those rare artists who builds and grows, and a decade on is still challenging herself and taking risks. Her third album, 2016's *My Woman* was a landmark, giving Olsen her first chart entry and leading to an acclaimed performance at Glastonbury. It was around then that she began noticing obsessive fans in the audience with her face tattooed on their bodies.

Three years later, *All Mirrors* was an even bigger and bolder effort, her shimmering songs showcased in spectacular arrangements combining brooding synths with the full firepower of a 12-piece string section. She followed with 2020's *Whole New Mess*, which could not have sounded more different featuring some of the same songs recorded in intimate style in a church.

Then, of course, came the pandemic, one of several simultaneous upheavals in her life. She came out as gay and fell in love, noting that: "finally, at the ripe age of 34, I was free to be me". Then both her parents died.

All of these experiences have been distilled into the ten unflinching songs on *Big Time*. It's a record that is sharp with both fresh grief and fresh love, tender and vulnerable and yet full of a warm and transformative optimism. "I can't say that I'm sorry/ when I don't feel so wrong anymore," she sings on the opener *All The Good Times*.

Sonically it's a record full of dramatic shifts and twists while her expansive voice has an extraordinary elasticity that means she can evoke Patsy Cline on the elegiac title track and Polly Harvey on the cathartic *Go Home*. Fearless, intense and wise, now is Olsen's time. ***NW***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## Wilco
Cruel Country

★★★★½

*CD* **dBpm Records**

**PERHAPS NO BAND** did more than Wilco to spread the gospel of Americana, the rootsy genre drawing on vernacular forms such as folk and country and reinventing them for our times. Then the band led by Jeff Tweedy moved into a more experimental form of alt-rock, adding electronics and synths to 2004's *A Ghost Is Born*, which won a Grammy for Best Alternative Music album. *Cruel Country* finds Wilco returning to their roots with the strongest alt-country leanings we've heard from them in 20

**_Cruel Country_ finds Wilco returning to their strongest alt-country roots in 20 years**

years. A double album, it's a loose concept which chronologically tackles the troubled history of the US, starting with images of migration in songs such as *Hints* and *Empty Condor* before ending in the dystopia of *The Plains* with its stark portrait of a country struggling to retain its moral compass. Semi-acoustic and recorded in single takes with virtually no overdubs, it's a tour de force from first to last. ***NW***

## Jack Flanagan
Rides The Sky

★★★★½

*CD* **Modern Sky**

**MYSTERY JETS BASSIST** and vocalist Jack Flanagan's debut solo record is not quite the big coming out party that fans might expect. *Rides The Sky* comprises 12 tracks written and recorded over a 10-year period, making it more of a compilation album by definition. And the bits-and-pieces nature really tells throughout the record, with Flanagan's style and tone of voice evolving and developing before our very ears until the sophisticated, breezy Beatles-Bowiesque pop of the latter tracks. There's no shortage of songwriting skill or melodic vim here, but best to mark this one down for hardcore Mystery Jets fans first and foremost. ***PH***

## Schubert
Complete Works For Violin And Piano
Naaman Sluchin
Piet Kuijken

★★★★½

*2x CD* **Passacaille**

**IT'S A MEASURE** of their regard for Schubert's work that Sluchin and Kuijken spent over a decade studying these works, as well as considering the most appropriate instruments to use. For these recordings Sluchin plays a violin from 1725, while Kuijken performs on a restored fortepiano by Schantz circa 1828. The playing is confident and assured and the performances both sensitive and full of insights. Indeed, the earlier sonatas are rarely played with such poise and security. *Fantasie* is such a wonderful piece and beautifully played. The recordings sound clear and forward, but not dry or close, reproducing both instruments well. ***JH***

***Home, Before And After* is Spektor's eighth studio album**

## Regina Spektor
Home, Before And After

★★★★½

*CD* **Warner Records**

**LIKE KATE BUSH,** Björk and Tori Amos, singer songwriter Spektor has an unmistakable sound that is pretty much unique – there's certainly no mistaking one of her records for anyone else. And so the off-kilter, often whimsical ditties continue with the lush production of *Home, Before And After*. Although her lyrics might be a bit Marmite, there's no arguing with the way the multiple layers of orchestra, drums and occasional electronica slowly build to a euphoric whole before being stripped away again to just piano and Spektor's beguiling voice. None more so than on lead single *Up The Mountain*, which has more twists in its five minutes than lesser artists' entire albums. ***JDW***

## AUDIOFILE VINYL ★★★★★

### Charles Mingus, Hampton Hawes, Dannie Richmond
Trio

*180g vinyl* HOT PICK **Rhino/Parlophone**

**THIS DELUXE RE-RELEASE** sticks to the Jubilee label album artwork and presents a disc of alternate takes alongside the seven cuts first released back in 1957. It finds the bandleader/bassist in the company of pianist Hampton Hawes who had played with Charlie Parker and Dexter Gordon, and long-term Mingus drummer Dannie Richmond. A trio of musicians at the top of their game playing a mix of standards such as *Laura* and *Yesterdays* alongside originals including *Back Home Blues* and *Dizzy Moods*, Mingus' reworking of Dizzy Gillespie's *Woodyn You*.

The sound on the original album is good for its age, open and dynamic but tonally a bit crude and lacking in space due to its mono origins. The alternate takes disc is in another league with good separation and apparently genuine stereo depth. The version of *Summertime*, which this band make their own with an emphasis on rhythm and a high tempo, is a stand out. Mingus takes the lead on a number of tunes with the blues numbers, of which there are two untitled examples, revealing just how expressive his playing could be. Mingus influenced a lot of musicians including Joni Mitchell and Kamasi Washington, this release reveals why. ***JK***

Picture credit: Jamie Kelter Davis (Wilco)

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**5 KUDOS AUDIO**
A long-established UK company making some of the finest sounding speakers today. Their speakers have a neutral tonal balance, very precise imaging, and are well balanced across all frequencies. High resolution of fine details producing a broad and deep soundstage. Bass is very fast and controlled especially in the Titan range where the isobaric technology is employed.

## Kelly Lee Owens

LP.8

★★★★☆

*CD* **Smalltown Supersound**

**IN THE PAST** the Welsh electronic producer has excelled in complex, but highly danceable techno and intelligent EDM. She may not go for the jugular in terms of big hooks and established tropes of chart dance hits, but she's always produced terrific, refined and whole albums. On *LP.8* the mood is more ethereal – and in some instances like *Anadlu*, positively soundtrackesque. The emphasis here is not so much on beats, but soundscapes. Which includes the mournful piano piece *Nana Piano* and the sound of Owens' own voice. This is not one for dancing, this is Lee Owens' chill-out album. ***PH***

**A contemporary of Haydn and Mozart, Wranitzky composed 45 symphonies**

## Paul Wranitzky

Symphonies

Akademie Für Alte Music Berlin

★★★★☆

*2x CD* **Deutsche Harmonia Mundi**

**WITH LATE 18TH-CENTURY** Europe frequently beset by War, Paul Wranitzky's works often reflect the violent military conflicts of the time. His *C minor symphony* Op 31 deals with the French revolution, painting a bold picture of key events, and ending with the prospect of peace. The *D minor symphony La Tempesta* is also highly dramatic, with impressive use of a thunder machine that makes a lusty noise. Excellent performances; one could hardly hope to hear these works played with greater commitment and the recordings sound open and detailed, with some startling dynamics. ***JH***

## Schumann

Novelletten

Gesänge der Frühe

Martin Helmchen

★★★★☆

*CD* **Alpha Classics**

**FOR ME, THE** eight *Novelletten* are among Schumann's greatest compositions. The music has everything, from extrovert flights of fancy to moments of tender intimacy, yet very few pianists play the complete cycle. Martin Helmchen clearly believes in every note and his playing is full of brilliant colour. I feel Dino Ciani's account is more poetic, but Helmchen's probing interpretation offers many unique insights. He also includes the *Gesänge Der Frühe*, plus Clara Schumann's *Soirees Musicales*. The Bechstein fortepiano produces a wide range of tone colours and dynamics – well captured by the excellent recording. ***JH***

## Ural Thomas & The Pain

Dancing Dimensions

HOT PICK

★★★★★

*CD* **Bella Union**

**THERE'S NO SHORTAGE** of contemporary bands raiding the soul sounds of the Sixties and Seventies for inspiration. But it's risky, with some coming off as schlocky karaoke. This is a different beast as Thomas has been grooving for over 60 years with a voice capable of the soulfulness that affirms your very existence. He's surrounded himself with young guns that shoot to thrill within funky arrangements that vibrate with energy. *Gimme Some Ice-Cream* will put a smile on your face. Just as tasty is *Apple Pie* with its nod to Sly Stone, while *Hung Up On A Dream* is blues with a long fuse – a much-needed paean for peace. ***PSH***

## COOL COLLECTION

**Claire Elise Boucher, aka Grimes, is quite the mover and shaker – her work not constrained by the usual genres or labels. R&B, pop, rap, rock, dreampop... you name it, she's it. She's also famous for her relationship with Elon Musk, so let's take a peek at her musical roots**

### Outkast

Stankonia

**LaFace (2000)**

The fourth LP from Atlantan duo Andre 3000 and Big Boi, *Stankonia* was Outkast's breakthrough. Grimes says: "This was the first album I ever bought. I remember getting home and opening the CD and there was a psychedelic naked woman on the CD... I knew that if my parents saw it they'd take it away. When I actually got to listen to the album, it was fantastic, idiosyncratic, sonically diverse and super weird. Opened my mind in more ways than one."

### Tool

AEnima

**Zoo (1996)**

The second LP from Maynard Keenan's LA heavy mob, *AEnima* set a few critics' teeth on edge. Grimes, however, was enthralled: "This is such a puzzle, rhythmically, melodically... so complex. It's hard to jam along until you get to know it well and yet it's so easy to sing along. It's complicated, but very satisfying as pop music somehow. The idea of alternative music with technically proficient vocals was really introduced to me by this album."

### Yeah Yeah Yeahs

Fever To Tell

**Interscope (2003)**

Karen O and co's debut was an: "exhilarating dose of lo-fi garage-rock". Grimes agrees: "My friend gave me a tape in grade 10 or so, it was *Fever To Tell*, but he didn't label it... so I had no clue what band it was. I put it into my Walkman and walked home from school, and my mind was completely blown to bits. I will distinctly remember that moment for the rest of my life. It was the first time I'd heard female-fronted alternative music. I listened to the album for years without knowing what band or album it was."

Picture credit: Eli Russell Linnetz (Grimes)

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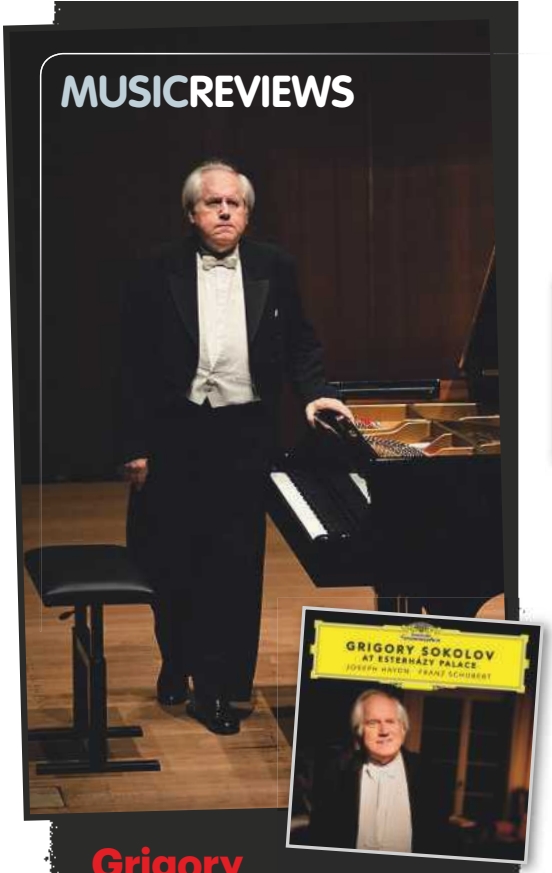



## Grigory Sokolov

At Esterhazy Palace
Joseph Haydn
Franz Schubert

★★★★★

*2x CD & Blu-ray* **Deutsche Grammophon**

**ANYONE GIVING A** piano recital at Esterhazy Palace could hardly avoid including a few sonatas by Haydn who spent much of his life there composing. Sokolov chooses sonatas 32, 47 and 49 and plays them in a highly probing introspective manner that emphasises their darker qualities. But the main work is Schubert's *Four Impromptus* D 935, and Sokolov's playing – at once structured and discursive – pores over and investigates every nook and cranny. With an artist as inspired as Sokolov it's

**Mesmerising playing while the live recording is clear and immediate without being too close**

best to forget your prejudices as to how this music should be played and just let him guide you. You can trust him; he definitely knows the way! The live recording is clear and immediate without being too close. There are a few audience noises, but for the most part everyone is quiet and highly attentive. And so they should be; this is mesmerising playing in every sense of the word. ***JH***

## Στella
Up And Away

★★★★☆

*CD* **Sub Pop**

**SUB POP FORGED** its reputation in the crucible of grunge, but as times and tastes have changed so has the label, diversifying throughout the decades. Its latest release is from Athens no less, and a beguiling label debut from Stella Chronopoulou – Στella as she's known – a musician and visual artist from the historic Greek capital. What she produces here are 10 perfectly formed tracks of whispy, languorous pop music infused with Hellenic folk music. This combination of the traditional and new styles gives *Up And Away* a hazy, almost gentle, psychedelic feel – think Khruangbin-style phrasing on tracks like *Nomad* and *Manéros*. ***PH***

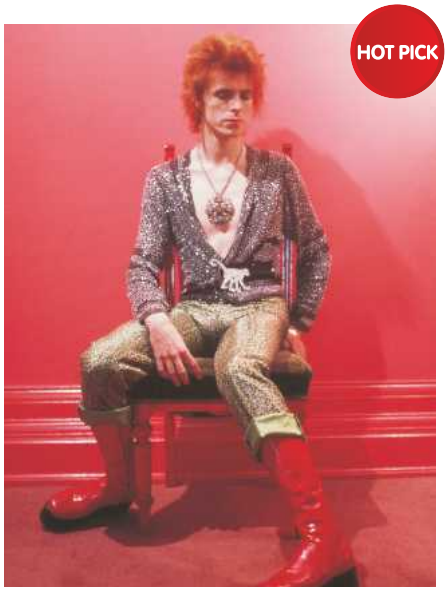
## JS Bach
The Well-Tempered Clavier II
Trevor Pinnock

HOT PICK

★★★★★

*2x CD* **Deutsche Grammophon**

**HAVING RECORDED BOOK** I of Bach's *WTC* for DG in 2020, Pinnock follows with Book II. The work is a long journey through the 12 major and minor keys. The playing is very assured and there are no interpretative tricks or gimmicks – just the music, performed with skill and distinction. Indeed, Pinnock almost convinces you this music plays itself and his contributions are minimal. However, his is an art that conceals art; it's not easy to perform these pieces in such a self-effacing manner and avoid making them seem dull or mechanical. The recording is bright and tangy, with the instrument set in a clear luminous acoustic. ***JH***



HOT PICK

## David Bowie
The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars (50th Anniversary)

★★★★★

*180g vinyl* **Parlophone Records**

**REISSUED 50 YEARS** and one day after the original UK release, this glorious half-speed recording is the perfect way to celebrate the birth of David Bowie's most celebrated alter-ego. Cut on a Neumann VMS80 from 192kHz restored masters of the original Trident Studios master tapes at Air Studios by John Webber, from the opening drums of *Five Years* to the closing strings of *Rock 'n' Roll Suicide*, Ziggy has never sounded so crystal clear. Essential for Bowie fans, slap on some makeup, turn it up and enjoy one of the greatest guitar riffs of all time on *Ziggy Stardust*. Superb. ***JDW***

## Gustav Mahler
Wunderhorn
Dietrich Hemschel
Bochumer Symphoniker
Steven Sloane

★★★★☆

*2x CD* **Avanti Classic**

**THIS RECORDING FORMS** the soundtrack to the movie *Wunderhorn*. It takes the regular 12 songs from Mahler's *Das Knaben Wunderhorn* and adds a further 12 including the finale of the *4th Symphony* (sung by a baritone), *Urlicht* from the *Resurrection* symphony, plus several of Mahler's *Songs Of Youth*. Hemschel's voice can be lyrical and smooth or a shade rough with moments of barking. But at best, he's expressive and points each word with meaning. The recording is clear and detailed, with the voice forwardly balanced. But 84 minutes on two full-price discs is poor value when you can get this much music on a single CD. ***JH***

## Phi-Psonics
The Cradle

HOT PICK

★★★★★

*CD* **Gondwana**

**PUTTING WEST COAST** cool back on the jazz map Phi-Psonics are lead by bassist Seth Ford-Young and count multi-instrumentalist Sylvain Carton and Wurlitzer meister Mitchell Yoshida among their number. Multi-tracking allows Carton to blow his various horns (bass clarinet and flute) in unison, add this to keys, bass and drums and you get laid back grooves with fabulous tone. Some pieces sound like standards, others are atmospheric and the two bonus tracks are even upbeat – the last *The Searcher* is a highlight that sees Ford-Young take the spotlight to fine effect. The relaxed sound lets you float off in the summer breeze. ***JK***

Picture credits: Martin Fleck (Grigory Sokolov), Mick Rock (David Bowie)

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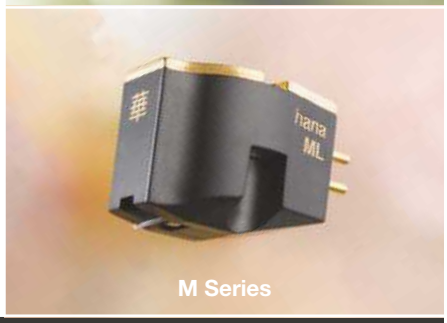


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## Sun's Signature
Sun's Signature

HOT PICK

★★★★★

*CD* **Partisan Records**

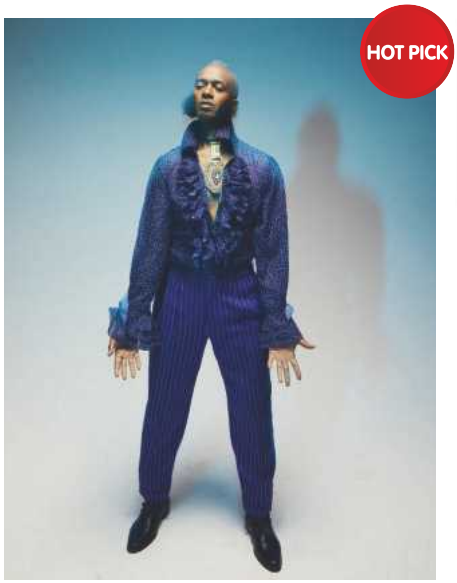
**VOICE OF** the Cocteau Twins, Liz Frazer is back after a 13-year sabbatical. *Golden Air* lulls the listener in with a bucolic atmosphere before side stepping into psychedelic/glam rock. Frazer sounds crystal clear and capable of the most intricate oral acrobatics in and around arrangements that range from lullabies to Massive Attack-style electronica, and in the case of *Underwater*, all are found within the same song. The highlight on this impeccable collection is *Make Lovely The Day*, with Frazer's voice telling a story of mannered love over a delicate acoustic guitar. ***PSH***

## Beethoven
Diabelli Variations
Mitsuko Uchida

★★★★☆

*CD* **Decca**

**FOR HER LATEST** Decca album Uchida has chosen Beethoven's 33 variations on a trite little theme by Anton Diabelli. Beethoven was a master at writing variations and delighted in the myriad possibilities even a superficial theme such as this could yield. Uchida gives a commanding confident performance that reveals every facet of this quixotic kaleidoscopic piece. The music has been carefully thought through, yet not over thought. Everything sounds logical, spontaneous and inevitable. Decca's recording is clear and detailed, effortlessly capturing every dynamic shift and change of tone colour as it happens. ***JH***



HOT PICK

## Fantastic Negrito
White Jesus Black Problems

★★★★★

*CD* **Storefront Records**

***WHITE JESUS BLACK*** *Problems* is Negrito's most ambitious project yet, as the songs recount the true story of his ancestors – a white indentured servant who lived in a common-law marriage with an African-American enslaved man in defiance of the separatist laws of 1750's colonial Virginia. The songs tackle themes of racism, capitalism, religion and the meaning of freedom in provocative fashion over an inspired soundtrack that ranges from Delta blues to African grooves via soul, R&B and gospel, and sounds like a cross between Curtis Mayfield, Hendrix, Prince and Sly Stone. ***NW***

HOT PICK

## Richard Stöhr
Concerto In The Old Style For Strings, Piano And Percussion
Suite No.2 Op 120
Agnieszka Kopacka

★★★★★

*CD* **Toccata Classics**

**RICHARD STÖHR WAS** a noted Austrian composer and pedagogue. Following the Anschluss in March 1938, Stöhr left Europe for the USA, joining the Curtis Institute, but as a composer became utterly forgotten. Yet he wrote cultivated and engaging music – enjoyable to listen to and spiritually nourishing. The pre-war *Concerto* is quite fascinating, while the post-war *2nd Suite* is serious without being heavy. The performances are excellent with an idiomatic understanding of Stöhr's narrative that takes us on an intriguing journey. There's good sound too; clear, open and very detailed. More please! ***JH***

## Hollie Cook
Happy Hour

★★★★☆

*CD* **Merge Records**

**WITH GODFATHER BOY** George and dad The Sex Pistols' Paul Cook, it's no surprise that Hollie knows her way around a song. There's a strong ska and reggae seam running through this album, with the sumptuous *Gold Girl* sounding like the Bond theme The Specials never recorded. Cook describes her music as: "tropical pop" and nowhere is this more apt than on *Move My Way* as it boasts the sort of bouncy horn bursts and swooning harmonies that should be mandatory at all summer carnivals. It's a set packed full of melodies, rendered in a slick production and bursting sunshine for the ears. Listen and get ready to dance in the sun. ***PSH***

## OPEN REEL TAPE

## Bert Kaempfert
Bye Bye Blues

★★★★★

*Open reel tape* **Horch House (horchhouse.com)**

**FOR OUR FIRST** venture into the growing revival of interest in professional open reel tape, we focus on a company that has access to a range of original master tapes of legendary analogue recordings. The Austrian-based Horch House has a very well-earned reputation for producing high-quality copy-master tapes directly from the originals that were used to cut the LP lacquers of classical works, jazz, blues and easy-listening music. Horch is committed to preserving the original mix of a recording, rather than performing any kind of remastering, which usually results in adverse changes to the original sound.

Following meetings between Horch's Volker Lange and Doris Kaempfert, the daughter of well-known jazz and easy-listening orchestra leader and composer Bert, Horch now has quite a collection of Bert Kaempfert copy-master tape albums available. One of the latest is *Bye Bye Blues*, which was originally released in 1965.

A distinctive feature of Kaempfert's music was a crackling bass sound, which was produced on a Fender Telecaster bass by Kaempfert's guitarist/bassist Ladislav Geisler. The music also featured renowned trumpeters such as Fred Moch – who features on *Bye Bye Blues*. The album comprises Kaempfert's interpretation of known pieces alongside a few of his own compositions, such as his hit *Wiederseh'n*.

The sound quality is superb and the dynamic range is much more realistic than that of the vinyl version. The bass response is tight and well controlled and the top end is bright without being harsh and edgy. Overall, the tape offers an astounding quality that takes the listener about as close as their audio system will allow to the original mastering and performance. ***NR***

Picture credit: Travis Shinn (Fantastic Negrito)

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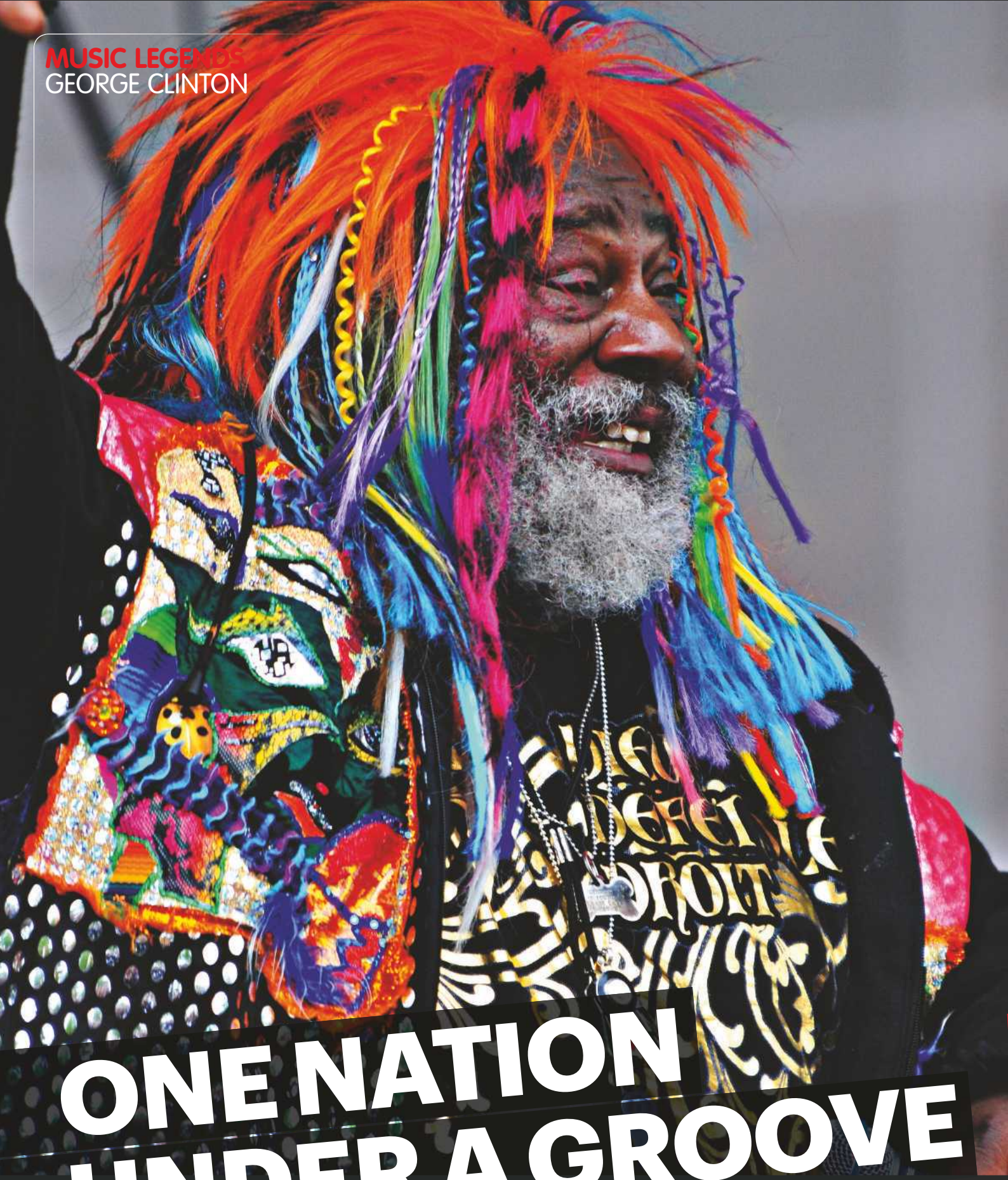

# ONE NATION UNDER A GROOVE

Strap in for the ride of your life as funk, rock and R&B are mixed with psychedelia and a pinch of sci-fi. ***Nigel Williamson*** gets down with George Clinton

Picture credit: Shutterstock.com/carroteater

Take a banging dose of R&B, lace it with mind-bending quantities of LSD, season it with rock, gospel and psychedelia and add some outlandish sci-fi fantasies and you have the glorious sound which George Clinton called the "Parliafunkadelicment Thang".

Recording both as Parliament and Funkadelic, Clinton revolutionised black music in the Seventies, deconstructing soul music until it turned into a funk-rock monster by adding influences as diverse as Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa and Sly Stone.

One of his Parliament albums was titled *Free Your Mind… And Your Ass Will Follow* and nobody squared the equation of headspace and dancefloor or united brain and booty more than Clinton's P-Funk collective.

Clinton – aka Dr Funkenstein – was the ringleader of the 'Parliafunkadelicment Thang' but the mothership could not have taken off without his fellow Funkateers, who helped to realise his vision. Over the years the lineup was in a state of constant flux, but prominent among the "funkiest muthas in the universe" were Eddie Hazel, the master of wah-wah guitar, Moog maestro Bernie Worrell, the world's most rhythmically inventive bassist Bootsy Collins and The Horny Horns, who included James Brown refugees Maceo Parker and Fred Wesley.

## Freak of the week

Along the way there were deaths, prison sentences, army call ups, business fall outs and drug psychosis, but through it all they created a sound world that effectively became a genre in itself. It wasn't R&B and it wasn't rock. It was simply P-Funk.

The sonic maelstrom was topped by Clinton's scattergun lyrics. On songs with titles such as *Maggot Brain*, *Cosmic Slop*, *America Eats Its Young* and *One Nation Under A Groove* he played preacher, poet, pimp, professor, prophet, psychoanalyst, politician, hustler, acid dreamer, myth maker, subliminal seducer, cosmic riddler and all-round free spirit.

The live shows were barnstorming black guerrilla theatre extravaganzas that made P-Funk seem like a cross between a night out at the Apollo in Harlem and Barnum and Bailey's circus with a space-age twist.

The Parliament/Funkadelic machine ruled over black music during the Seventies, with more than 40 hit singles and a spate of platinum albums. In the Eighties, when R&B went corporate, Clinton renewed the attack jettisoning the Parliament and Funkadelic names (but not the musicians) and relaunching as the P.Funk All-Stars and as a solo artist with 1982's *Computer Games*, which included the synth stomping *Atomic Dog* – which helped launch a hip-hop revolution.

By the early Nineties, rappers reared on P-Funk were namechecking Clinton as the likes of MC Hammer, LL Cool J, Ice Cube and Snoop Dogg were sampling his infectious

**Sex and politics, black power, hippie idealism and conspiracy theories fed in to Clinton's lyrics**

grooves. The West Coast hip-hop subgenre known as G-funk and spearheaded by Dr Dre was inspired by Clinton and his influence extended to white musicians, too, such as Red Hot Chili Peppers, who asked him to produce their album *Freaky Styley*, and Primal Scream, with whom he also recorded.

"I always had that theory in my head that I didn't want to just be a singing group of musicians, I wanted to be a thang," Clinton said in 2021. "That's why we called it Parliafunkadelicment Thang. We wanted to be theatrical so it would last for years, not just for the Top 10. That's what I aimed it for, to last so long. That gave us a lot of room – we didn't have to be whatever the Top 40 was doing, but then again, we could do that if we felt like doing it."

George Edward Clinton was born in North Carolina in July 1941 and grew up in New Jersey. By the time he was 15 he had formed a doo-wop group called The Parliaments, rehearsing in the back room of a barbershop.

The Parliaments released only two singles during the next ten years, both of which flopped, but in the mid-Sixties Clinton moved the group to Detroit, hoping to sign with Motown. Berry Gordy passed on The Parliaments, feeling he had enough male vocal groups on his roster – but he employed Clinton as a songwriter and producer.

While working at Motown, Clinton moonlighted for rival Detroit labels, producing records for the likes of Darrell Banks and The Debonaires which have since become northern soul classics, and in 1967 The Parliaments finally had a hit record with *(I Wanna) Testify* on Revilot Records.

Predating Sly Stone and the psychedelic soul records Norman Whitfield would produce at Motown, *(I Wanna) Testify* crashed into the Billboard top 20 and created an early template for what would become the P-Funk sound.

When Revilot folded and The Parliaments contract was sold to Atlantic, Clinton refused to record for the label. Unable to use the name, his vocal group was reborn as Parliament and his backing band as Funkadelic.

He had also started dropping acid, and the suit-and-ties of the doo-wopping Parliaments gave way to wild Afros, hippie threads and a more experimental funk-rock sound.

Signed to Invictus, the label started by the Motown hit-writing team of Holland, Dozier and Holland, the first P-Funk album, *Omnium*, appeared under the Parliament name in 1970. Taking its title from the heaviest metal in the periodic table, it juxtaposed soul vocals against acid-drenched guitar psych-outs with bagpipes and harpsichords thrown into mix.

The first self-titled album by Funkadelic appeared the same year, rocked even harder and was even more iconoclastic. The critic Peter Shapiro likened it to: "The Temptations and Grand Funk Railroad emerging together from the rubble left by Detroit's race riot".

## ALBUM BY ALBUM

**AS PARLIAMENT**

### 1970

**OSMIUM**

A promising first outing for the nascent P-Funk sound, not yet fully developed but proving that rock and soul tropes could successfully cohabit.

### 1974

**UP FOR THE DOWN STROKE**

Monolithic grooves with Bootsy Collins laying down some preposterous basslines as Clinton deconstructs and updates Sixties material such as *(I Wanna) Testify*.

### 1975

**CHOCOLATE CITY**

A multi-layered and sophisticated black-power fantasy about America's neglected inner cities, laced with wit and chaotic jamming.

### 1975

**MOTHERSHIP CONNECTION**

Led by the hit single *Give Up The Funk (Tear The Roof Off The Sucker)* as Clinton's Afro-futurist sci-fi fantasy hits warp speed.

### 1977

**FUNKENTELECHY VS. THE PLACEBO SYNDROME**

More surreal sci-fi fantasy in a tale about cloning and social control. Musically it's a monster, too.

**AS FUNKADELIC**

## 1970

**FUNKADELIC**

The opening line: "If you suck my soul I will lick your funky emotions" sets the tone for the wicked mix of wit, funk and psychedelia that were to become Clinton trademarks.

## 1970

**FREE YOUR MIND... AND YOUR ASS WILL FOLLOW**

One of the greatest album titles and the music lives up to the billing on tracks such as *Funky Dollar Bill* and *I Wanna Know If It's Good To You*.

## 1971

**MAGGOT BRAIN**

The opening track sounds like Hendrix jamming with Sly Stone, the closer *Wars Of Armageddon* is an epic wall of sound – and everything in between is just as great.

## 1972

**AMERICA EATS ITS YOUNG**

A double album with Clinton at his most political yet. Judicious editing might have honed it into an even better set, but the grooves are just monumental.

## 1973

**COSMIC SLOP**

Less political than its predecessor, but still full of social commentary, such as the title track and *No Compute*, which tackle racial stereotypes head on.

Even better was Clinton's third album of 1970 and the second under the Funkadelic banner, *Free Your Mind… And Your Ass Will Follow*. To escape from the physical ghetto, the dispossessed must first free themselves from the mental straightjacket of oppression. Or was it the other way around? It hardly mattered for it was the linkage of intellectual freedom and physical liberation that was all important, a connection that had been made by writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes during the Harlem Renaissance and by intellectual jazz musicians in the Fifties, but which was a new phenomenon in black popular music.

Clinton followed with Funkadelic's 1971 album *Maggot Brain*, rumoured to have been so named after he had found the festering corpse of his brother who had overdosed on drugs – although the title also served to reference the carnage in Vietnam and the grim realities of life for those whom the American dream had by-passed.

Sex and politics, black power, hippie idealism and conspiracy theories all fed in to Clinton's salvo against the iniquities of 'straight' America, while tracks such as *Hit It And Quit It*, *Can You Get To That* and *Super Stupid* with its sludgy, Black Sabbath-style riff, were perfect examples of his visionary fusion of funk and psychedelia. The album closed with a nine-minute apocalyptic wall of sound titled *Wars Of Armageddon* and stands alongside Sly And The Family Stone's *There's A Riot Goin' On* as a provocative comment on America's spiritual bankruptcy as seen from the ghetto. The added glory was that as our asses followed our minds, you could shake your booty to it, too.

*America Eats Its Young*, which appeared in 1972 was an even more savage manifesto.

**"We wanted to be theatrical so that it would last for years, not just for the Top 10"**

An epic double album that made its political message explicit on the cover which depicted the Statue of Liberty gorging on the nation's babies, once again party tunes were mixed with political anger.

Like many double LPs, it has been criticised for being in need of some judicious editing and a retrospective review in Pitchfork got the balance right when it noted the record contains: "too much great stuff to dismiss, but more than it needs".

*Cosmic Slop* in 1973 found Clinton exploring anti-war fantasies, sexual politics and the social concerns of the ghetto. The title track told the story of a single mother with five children who had to work as a prostitute in order to feed her family.

### Get off your ass and jam

Next, Clinton recorded the first Parliament album in four years with 1974's *Up For The Down Stroke*, which updated old material such as *(I Wanna) Testify*. Having revived the brand, more Parliament albums followed in short order, including *Chocolate City* (1975), an oblique concept about America's neglected inner cities and *Mothership Connection* (1976), a dazzling fusion of funk and science-fiction which was the first to feature James Brown's former horn section. In the middle of the title track Clinton repurposed *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* as a space-age anthem and the album's sci-fi Afro-futurist concept came to form the backbone of P-Funk's concert performances in which a spaceship was lowered onto the stage to herald the arrival of Dr. Funkenstein.

More inspired sci-fi lunacy followed on 1977's *Funkentelechy Vs The Placebo Syndrome*, in which Sir Nose D'voidoffunkis engaged in a battle to the death with the

## 1974

**STANDING ON THE VERGE OF GETTING IT ON**

One of Clinton's smoothest and most rock-oriented releases, although there are still some great R&B bangers such as the title track and *Red Hot Mama*.

## 1975

**LET'S TAKE IT TO THE STAGE**

Despite the title this is not a live album, but a set of tighter and shorter songs with Clinton at his most sexually provocative on *No Head No Backstage Pass*.

## 1976

**HARDCORE JOLLIES**

Funkadelic's first album after a move to Warner Brothers had plenty of fine moments without matching the brilliance of Parliament's concurrent release *Mothership Connection*.

## 1978

**ONE NATION UNDER A GROOVE**

Funkadelic's finest hour. The track *Who Says A Funk Band Can't Play Rock?* said it all as the band stayed as funky as hell while rocking harder than most white boys ever could.

**AS GEORGE CLINTON AND/OR WITH THE P.FUNK ALL-STARS**

## 1982

**COMPUTER GAMES**

Officially Clinton's first solo album, although most of the P-Funk crew is present on a set on which *Atomic Dog* is the standout track.

## 1983

**URBAN DANCEFLOOR GUERILLAS**

Under the moniker of the P.Funk All-Stars, the mix of dance tunes and clever wordplay outshone the solo album *You Shouldn't-Nuf Bit Fish* released at the same time.

## 1985

**SOME OF MY BEST JOKES ARE FRIENDS**

If getting Thomas Dolby to sing with him was indeed a joke, it was not a particularly good one. Although billed as a Clinton solo album, the P-Funk crew all help out.

## 1986

**R&B SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET**

Incorporating elements of hip-hop and electro, the highlight of this solo set is a thrilling duet with Vanessa Williams on *Hey Good Lookin'*.

"protector of the pleasure principle", Star Child, whose weapon against the universe's killjoys was a "bop gun". The album included the huge hit *Flashlight,* which boasted one of the most audacious grooves in the entire P-Funk canon. The next Parliament album, 1978's *Motor Booty Affair*, spawned another dancefloor banger to match it in *Aqua Boogie (A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop)*.

By now the two bands were virtually indistinguishable and the same year produced Funkadelic's finest hour with the album *One Nation Under A Groove*. "Who says a funk band can't play rock?" Clinton asks early on in the piece and then proceeded to give the most emphatic and anthemic answer. The set was not so much a collection of songs as: "one sustained funk symphony", as the All-Music Guide puts it.

It was the peak of Clinton's commercial success, but he and his crew were in danger of burn out. Besides the two wings of the P-Funk mothership there were side projects such as Bootsy's Rubber Band, Brides of Frankenstein and The Horny Horns, and under the unrelenting schedule the band began to unravel. By 1981 Parliament and Funkadelic had both fizzled out and Clinton re-emerged the following year as a solo artist, albeit with some recognisable core musicians still in tow.

**Dr Funkenstein was nothing without his funk allstars**

Clinton and former Parliament/Funkadelic alumni continued to tour and record as the P.Funk All Stars, but as the decade went on he became increasingly mired in legal difficulties and contractual disputes – the lesson of which was that if you are going to record with 40-plus musicians for four labels under three different names, make sure the lawyers do the paperwork beforehand and not several million record sales later.

There were still some inspired moments, such as the P-Funk All-Stars' 1983 album *Urban Dancefloor Guerillas* and a thrilling duet with Vanessa Williams on Clinton's 1986 album *R&B Skeletons In The Closet*. But there were a few missteps, too, like his collaboration with Thomas Dolby on 1985's *Some Of My Best Friends Are Jokes*.

### Hit and quit it

In later years Clinton's productivity slowed although he was much in demand to make guest appearances on albums by those he had influenced and his voice was heard on Kendrick Lamar's Grammy-winning album *To Pimp A Butterfly* and the following year on Childish Gambino's *Awaken My Love!*. In 2014 he recorded *First Ya Gotta Shake The Gate*, the first Funkadelic album since the Eighties and four years later came Parliament's first album in 38 years, *Medicaid Fraud Dogg*, co-writing with his son Tracey Lewis.

He announced a farewell tour in 2019, but three years later was back with Parliament Funkadelic's One Nation Under a Groove tour, on which he set out to play the landmark 1978 album in its entirety.

"Truth be told, it's never really been about me," he said. "It's always been about the music and the band. That's the real P-Funk legacy. They'll still be funkin' long after I stop" ●

Picture credit: Shutterstock.com/Jamie Lamor Thompson

## 1989

**THE CINDERELLA THEORY**

Was billed at the time as something of a "comeback album" on Prince's Paisley Park label after three years of being mired in contractual disputes, Public Enemy guest on one track.

## 1993

**HEY, MAN, SMELL MY FINGER**

Clinton raps over electronic beats and samples of old P-Funk material on a set that includes guest appearances by Prince, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre and Herbie Hancock.

## 1993

**DOPE DOGS**

Released under the P.Funk All-Stars banner, one of Clinton's wackier concepts about dope-sniffing dogs that become addicted to the drugs that they are employed to find.

## 1996

**T.A.P.O.A.F.O.M.**

The title stood for 'The Awesome Power of a Fully Operational Mothership' as Clinton reunited with P-Funk stalwarts Bernie Worrell, Bootsy Collins, Maceo Parker and Fred Wesley.

## 2008

**GEORGE CLINTON AND HIS GANGSTERS OF LOVE**

Guest appearances by Sly Stone, Carlos Santana and Red Hot Chili Peppers on an album of covers, from *Ain't That Peculiar* to *Let The Good Times Roll*.

# MAD FOR IT!

MANCHESTER

Paul Butterworth is the manager of the Manchester city centre branch of Richer Sounds, ***Daniel Sait*** finds out how he goes about keeping its customers happy

With some 13 years in business, in Richer Sounds' long history, this Manchester city centre venue is relatively new. It enjoys a prime location on Deansgate and manager Paul Butterworth explains its unique approach: "As a nationwide company, we stock a vast selection of brands that can be bought in-store and online. While we supply the full range of Richer Sounds products, we have also built up a carefully curated collection of premium audio products.

"We work closely with these brands to ensure we receive only the best training, so we can offer the best technical advice."

Some of the brands the store now includes are: PS Audio, Scansonic, Analogue Audio, Unison Research, Leema Acoustics, Primare, Solidsteel, Mo-Fi, Dual, Thorens, Duevel and Matrix Audio, which is music to Paul's ears as his involvement in the industry goes back a long way: "Quite a while ago, my mum became a manager of a pub and I was asked to find a sound system. I couldn't believe you could pay £2,000 for a CD player that didn't even come with an amplifier or speakers! That's when I started to learn properly about hi-fi separates and invested in my own system a couple of years later. I joined hi-fi retail a few years later, working for a local store for a few years before moving to Richer Sounds, becoming the manager in 2018."

And he has firm ideas about how to get the best out of each system sold: "I believe the magic of getting absorbed in music is not just in a system's technical capability, but also the way it fits into the room. We have a great bespoke installation service available in-store to help achieve this. For example, one of my favourite tips is to have an interesting piece of art hung directly between the speakers: Not only does this brighten up the room, but by having this visual centrepiece you'll also be more inclined to focus on that with your ears in the 'sweet spot', improving the imaging of the music.

**"Regardless of the budget, we make sure we tailor to the customers' needs"**

"Not everybody wants a dedicated listening room or a place to hide the system, so we feel it's best to have a choice of both hi-fi with traditional styling, as well as a more contemporary-looking system. This helps you complement the décor of the space where you want to enjoy your music."

Back in 2019 a big change came to the company as Richer Sounds was 'handed back to the staff' via an innovative scheme to give a stake in the company to the workers.

Paul explains: "Being proudly employee-owned means everyone you talk to has a real stake in the company's success, as we own 60 percent of the company via an employee ownership trust. Julian Richer sold his majority stake in Richer Sounds directly to us, and then as an added 'thank you', gifted every single colleague £1,000 for every year of service they've been with the company. All decisions are discussed by a Collegue Council, with representation from all areas of our business, ensuring the long-term growth and survival of the company. It's a great feeling that we have a direct say in the direction the business is heading, and our ideas can make a big difference in the company's success."

## No more stacking 'em high

It's fair to say that the company built its original reputation as a 'budget hi-fi' operation. Is that still a fair assessment? "Well, in 1994, Richer Sounds entered the Guinness Book of Records for the most sales per square foot of any retailer in the world, and it's still something we're very proud of. However, we've had a stigma from some of the hi-fi community as 'stack 'em high, sell 'em cheap', in other words undercutting the market and selling only budget hi-fi.

"But this was well over 30 years ago! These days, we still offer great bargains, but we're also focussed on our important premium customers. In other words, regardless of the budget, we make sure we tailor to the customers' needs. We're just as happy to help someone take their first steps into the wonderful world of hi-fi, as we are helping a customer with their latest high-end upgrade to their pride-and-joy system that they'll be enjoying for years to come."

## Reaching out

This customer-centric approach has strongly shaped the approach that the store takes. "We had been dipping our toes into esoteric hi-fi for a few years now. However, a major catalyst for turning this into the fully fledged project it is today was when I received a phone call from a gentleman who was looking to upgrade his hi-fi, but had specific space requirements to fit into a media unit. Our current range didn't have any options for him, so I contacted a couple of suppliers I admired – PS Audio and Leema Acoustics. I was keen to chat with these suppliers about helping not only this specific customer, but also on working closely together in future.

"It wasn't long before we received delivery of the PS Audio SACD transport and matching DAC, paired them with the Leema pre and power amplifier for this customer, and he was very impressed. We now have a great range of products already in-store for demonstration. The team has learnt all about the new ranges and as a company we undergo several hours of product training a week. At my branch we're extremely lucky, as this includes our new premium range.

"We encourage home demos as we find it's the best way to evaluate hi-fi using your own room acoustics. Our demo room is a great starting point for filtering down multiple options, but we'd always recommend the final demo be done at home."

With a refreshed approach now nailed down, Paul wants to combine the best of Richer Sounds' history with embracing new horizons. "We're not changing our principles or our mission statement, we're still here to find the perfect solution for everyone, no matter what the budget. The new approach simply allows us to dip into a bigger pool of products to achieve this. There are so few places where somebody can head into a brick-and-mortar store and have such a vast array of equipment on demonstration at such a vast array of price points."

**"We encourage home demos as the best way to evaluate hi-fi using your own room acoustics"**

As for the market in general, Paul is positive about the future: "Hi-fi is not only healthy and thriving, it's also evolving along with our living rooms and lives, which is exciting. As TVs get thinner and thinner, the sound suffers, and that's why soundbars have become so popular. However, the audiophiles among us know that these don't offer the best quality, relatively speaking. For example, we've seen a trend of more customers purchasing some great active speakers instead.

"This has been supplemented by the rise in turntable sales, as a lot of people want a simple hi-fi consisting of a turntable and a pair of speakers and have no intention of adding other components. The other popular trend right now is streaming amplifiers, which are kind of the modern equivalent of old stereo receivers – only better! Finally, headphone technology seems to constantly evolve, and this is another area we're very interested in. So much so, that I now use my headphone setup more than my main hi-fi. It doesn't have the scale or authority of a full system, but it has intimacy and detail, and I can listen to it at all hours of the day. I even have a portable version so I can listen in the garden in the summer."

## Hot right now

What about favourite systems right now? "I've been really enjoying valves of late. I recently demonstrated a Unison Research Sinfonia valve amplifier with a pair of Paradigm Founder 120H loudspeakers, including active bass drivers. I found the combination to be divine.

"For my home system, I use a Technics 1210GAE turntable with a Mo-Fi UltraGold cartridge. I run this into a Musical Fidelity M3x Vinyl phono stage. For headphone listening I use a Benchmark HPA3 amp and a lovely pair of Focal Stellia cans, or simply lossless audio on my iPhone coupled up to a Chord Hugo 2 DAC/headphone amp when I want to listen in the garden" ●

### TOP DEMO TRACKS

**"As clichéd as it sounds," explains Paul, "I love Pink Floyd, so I often use *Welcome To The Machine* and *The Happiest Days Of Our Lives*. For slightly more modern demo tracks, I enjoy Newton Faulkner's version of *Teardrop* and Lorde's cover of *Everybody Wants To Rule the World*. I like a demo track with extreme transients to push the electronics. Naturally, though, we would always advise customers to either bring their own demo material if it's physical media or choose a song that they're familiar with for streamed playback."**

# Ecosse
## Director MD2 SE digital interconnect

**ANALOGUE RCA CABLES** are not really suitable for use as a digital interconnect as they don't have the required 75ohm characteristic impedance. A cable with an incorrect impedance will generate reflections of the signal within itself. In addition, if the bandwidth of the cable is not wide enough for the digital signal, the digital pulses will have sloping edges, which can cause timing errors when the signal is decoded. These issues can result in jitter, which the digital processor in the DAC tries to correct, and all of this can degrade the audio signal.

The Director MD2 SE employs Ecosse's ultra-pure, grain-free monocrystal conductor for both the signal and return paths. The centre conductor is multi-stranded OCC copper insulated by a polyethylene primary dielectric together with a foamed polyethylene dielectric, which separates the central conductor from the outer tight woven multi-stranded OCC copper conductor. A separator element of conductive PVC and a monocrystal copper close-lapped braid screen is also included to protect the signal from EMI, ESI and RFI noise. The MD2 SE can be terminated with RCA or BNC plugs or a combination of the two. The cable is finished off in an attractive 9mm diameter blue sheath.

### Smooth operator

I connect one end of the Director MD2 SE to the coaxial digital output of a PrimaLuna ProLogue Eight Mk 2 CD player using it as a source and the other end to the coaxial S/PDIF input of a Furutech ADL Stratos to use the Stratos as an external DAC. I then spin a CD of Vivaldi's *Double Concertos* played by The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. The performances flow really smoothly and the trumpet blasts, although decidedly strident, are not at all edgy nor do they give any impression that the sound is breaking up in any way.

In summary, the Director MD2 SE is a quite excellent digital interconnect that does a great job of handling a digital audio data stream. Be sure to add it to your list if you're on the hunt for a new digital interconnect. ***NR***

**DETAILS**
**PRICE**
£150 for 1m cable
**TELEPHONE**
07580 691803
**WEBSITE**
ecossecables.co.uk

**OUR VERDICT**
★★★★★

# MCRU
## Ultimate MKIII speaker cable

**THIS ROBUST AND** high-quality cable is manufactured in Japan and is shielded to prevent the cable acting as an aerial and injecting RFI back into the amplifier. The review sample is fitted with Furutech cryogenically treated Z-Plugs at both ends, but the standard configuration is for the cables to be terminated with spade connectors for the speaker end and Z-Plugs for the amplifier end. The ends of the main section of cable are fitted with nicely finished wooden collars. The cable is directional, which is shown by arrows printed on the connectors' heatshrink sleeving. The Ultimate MKIII is available in lengths ranging from 1.5m to 7m.

Connecting the Ultimate MKIII between my valve monoblocks and transmission line speakers, I listen to a delightful copy-master tape of Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre* from UltraAnalogue Recordings of Toronto, with Tatsuki Narita on the violin and Yun-Yang Lee on the piano. My first impression is the violin is slightly edgy, but that disappears after running the cables in for a few hours. All cables need at least a few hours of running in before they sound their best, and the Ultimate MKIII is no exception.

### Attention seeker

The recording reveals itself to be really quite spectacular and exhilarating, and the image placement of the two instruments is spot on. Narita's opening chord on the violin is quite startling and grabs my attention. Meanwhile, all of the complexities of the two instruments are elegantly conveyed by the Ultimate MKIII.

A 45rpm LP of Lyn Stanley singing *Blue Moon* comes across as smooth, effortless and detailed, resulting in a performance that is scarily realistic in my listening room. The soundstage extends well beyond the width of my speakers with great depth and superb instrument focus.

This fabulous loudspeaker cable has an excellent build quality and really turns out refined and detailed performances with both wide and deep soundstages. ***NR***

**DETAILS**
**PRICE**
£450 for 1.5m stereo pair
**TELEPHONE**
01422 250590
**WEBSITE**
mcru.co.uk

**OUR VERDICT**
★★★★★

# True Colours Industries
## Python II speaker cable

**MARKETED AS A** no-compromise reference-grade speaker cable, the Python II is available as a standard pre-terminated stereo cable and also as a 4-conductor pre-terminated bi-wire. It uses aerospace-grade silver-plated, oxygen-free special copper alloy conductors for both the signal and return wires. Each wire has a PE primary insulation plus a PVC external insulation. It has an 11mm diameter round profile and the external sheath is a polyester braid jacket featuring a distinctive helical white-spotted stripe. My review sample is 3m and terminated with gold-plated Z/banana plugs.

I connect the Python II between my valve monoblocks and transmission line speakers. Starting off with a direct-cut LP from Chasing The Dragon of Rimsky Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol* performed by the National Symphony Orchestra, the finale is delivered with power and energy. The clarity of each instrument really shines through and the imaging is superb. The music is very involving and sounds very real in my room.

### Monty python

I then spin Barbra Streisand's *You Don't Bring Me Flowers* to see how well the Python II handles vocals. Streisand's voice is well positioned in front of the orchestral backing, which is sparkling and clear. The sensitive emotions are brilliantly conveyed in the opening section and when Streisand winds up the volume as the song progresses, the overall sound is quite spectacular. There is no trace of brashness to her voice, just soaring energy.

I finish off with some baroque music and a performance of Vivaldi's *Concerto No.7* from his Opus 7 collection played by I Musici with Heinz Holliger on the oboe. Holliger's playing in the first movement is both lively and exciting. Once again, I am struck by the excellent realism and clarity of the performance, and the instruments are very clearly defined within the soundstage.

To summarise, the Python II is a smart-looking speaker cable that is well made and delivers a really great sound to your speakers. ***NR***

**DETAILS**

**PRICE**
£26 per metre for a stereo cable or £50 per metre for a bi-wire cable

**TELEPHONE**
07710 196949

**WEBSITE**
tcicables.com

**OUR VERDICT**
★★★★★

# Russ Andrews
## GQ headphone extension cable

**THERE ARE TIMES** when the cable connected to your headphones just isn't long enough. If they have a removable cable, it's a simple process to buy a longer replacement. If, however, it is wired-in, the only solution is an extension. Designed for use with standard dynamic models terminated with either 6.35mm or 3.5mm Neutrik stereo jacks, the GQ is available in six lengths ranging from 1 to 5m. It can be supplied with any one of four termination options to accommodate either size of plug and socket at each end. The cable is made from four conductors of high-purity copper Kimber Kable that has been woven with the Kimber GQ geometry with a flexible and soft insulation.

I opt to put the extension to the test with my Sennheiser HD 800S (*HFC* 439) headphones connected to my valve headphone amplifier. My review sample is fitted with a 6.35mm plug on one end and a 6.35mm socket at the other. Both connectors are very well made and offer good, firm connections to my amplifier and headphone. In particular, the headphone socket has a nice locking mechanism so there is no risk of it becoming disconnected during use.

### Join the Q

Listening to a lovely recording of Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No.2*, the performance is crystal clear while the piano is never swamped by the orchestra, even during the loud crescendos. I find myself feeling really involved with the performance, which is both sophisticated and highly engaging. After removing the extension cable, I listen again and am unable to tell any difference in the audio quality.

The classic Pink Floyd recording of *Money* from *The Dark Side Of The Moon* is also reproduced beautifully, with the cash registers in the opening section bright and clear. Again, nothing is lost from the sound when the extension cable is fitted. This is a great-value and high-quality solution that will suit a wide range of different headphones. ***NR***

**DETAILS**

**PRICE**
£84 for a 1m cable

**TELEPHONE**
01539 797300

**WEBSITE**
russandrews.com

**OUR VERDICT**
★★★★★

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# Buying **Guide**

Selecting the components you want to audition is never easy, but help is at hand with our pick of the best to pass through our respected reviewing process

■ **CD players** p110 ■ **Amplifiers** p111 ■ **Pre/power amps** p111
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■ **Cartridges** p119 ■ **Phono stages** p120
■ **Headphones** p120-121 ■ **Portable DACs** p121

## CD PLAYERS

### Audiolab 6000CDT

**PRICE:** £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

The 6000CDT is exceptional at revealing what's on your discs to deliver a great big soundstage with plenty of detail inside. It can dig down deep into the mix to eke out the different musical strands while dynamically and rhythmically it's hard to beat at the price. In short, it's a super, highly affordable audiophile CD transport.

★★★★★

### Cambridge Audio AXC35

**PRICE:** £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Something of a budget marvel, you'll have to work extra hard to get the AXC35 to put a foot wrong. Bass is firm, detailed and blessed with excellent timing; the tonal palette is pleasingly broad and clean; and though the soundstage doesn't extend much beyond the speakers, there's great depth perspective.

★★★★★

### Exposure XM CD

**PRICE:** £1,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

A highly likeable half-width compact disc player that presents music in an enjoyable yet technically accurate manner, the XM CD might lack the operational slickness and versatility of some rivals, but it more than makes up for it with its energetic, lively sound, dynamic light and shade and charming character.

★★★★½

### Métronome Technologie Le Player 2S

**PRICE:** £5,100 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 449

As good as the sweet treble and rich bass are, what really impresses here is how when fed weaker CDs and impoverished MP3s the delivery remains unflappable and composed as layers of detail are locked into sharp focus.

★★★★★

### Musical Fidelity M3scd

**PRICE:** £1,150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 450

Able to string together elements of the mix dextrously for a natural and believable sound, the M3scd's combination of detail and rhythmic alacrity are highly impressive while its excellent timing and tonal balance leave you wanting more. With its lovely, lyrical sonics oozing detail and subtlety, this is an extremely capable player.

★★★★★

### Rotel CD11 Tribute

**PRICE:** £400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

A stunning team up between Marantz legend Ken Ishiwata before his sad passing and hi-fi luminary Karl-Heinz Fink, this is not one of those do-it-all players. Instead, its simple, refined sound and no-nonsense operation combine for a stunningly frill-free approach to superb playback at a great price.

★★★★★

## ALSO CONSIDER

**Audiolab**
8300CDQ
**£1,100 *HFC* 448**
Taking the winning recipe of the 8200CDQ and adding an upgraded DAC with DSD playback, the accurate and uncoloured sound of the Audiolab is unmistakable. Vast amounts of detail are extracted from the mix, soundstaging is incredible and music flows naturally.

★★★★★

**Leema Acoustics**
Stream IV
**£2,300 *HFC* 456**
The latest update to this long-established player feels a considerable step forward. CD playback is highly refined, assured and transparent, bass is rock solid with visceral depth that positively grips your solar plexus and streaming shares all these qualities for the best of both worlds.

★★★★½

**Marantz**
SACD 30n
**£2,700 *HFC* 468**
While its styling might be a touch divisive, the SACD 30n's involving, detailed and highly refined sound is beyond dispute whether it be with SACD or CD. Meanwhile, its neat supreme streaming integration ensures a great performance without discs too.

★★★★★

**Roksan**
K3 CD Di
**£1,300 *HFC* 403**
Offering the relatively rare combination of smooth tonality with a lively and animated way of presenting the music, the K3 CD Di displays a sweet and even tonal balance with a panoramic soundstage. In short, it's closer to good analogue sound than digital.

★★★★★

## AMPLIFIERS

### Copland
CSA150

**PRICE:** £4,988 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

A tube/transistor hybrid that's more than the sum of its parts, the CSA150 is not just a fine all-rounder as it also excels sonically with a big, strong, engaging performance that's also surprisingly subtle and detailed for such a muscular thing. Well worth an audition, it's a bargain at the price considering all that it does.

★★★★★

### Cyrus Audio
i9-XR

**PRICE:** £3,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 489

Minor annoyances aside (the speaker terminals being too close together and the headphone output on the rear), the impressive build quality, superb spec and outstanding performance means the i9-XR rivals similarly priced analogue-only rivals while offering connectivity they can't match.

★★★★★

### Exposure
3510

**PRICE:** From £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Delivering speaker control like a sergeant major on a power trip, you'd be forgiven for thinking the 3510 has been transported from the Eighties – all minimalist design and line-level inputs. Additional USB/DSD64 DAC and MC or MM phono boards are available and the performance comes across like a sizable blast from the past.

★★★★★

### Quad
Vena II

**PRICE:** From £650 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 448

With a comprehensive spec that moves Quad's most compact integrated on and enough weight to bring any type of music so thrillingly to life, the Vena II does a fine job of giving bass natural weight, snap and dynamic ability while delivering a big room-filling sound that belies those tiny dimensions.

★★★★★

### Rega
io

**PRICE:** £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

It might appear small and rather plain and it might not be over flowing with features or boast a huge amount of Watts, but give the io a talented source and you can't fail to be impressed by its outrageous musicality and lightness of foot. It's at one with the music with a supple fluency and rhythmical literacy.

★★★★★

### Yamaha
A-S3200

**PRICE:** £5,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 464

This highly accomplished performer succeeds through its breadth of ability rather than exceeding in one specific area. A highly capable performer, its snappy sound and gutsy demeanour combine with speed, grip versatility and power to create a great-looking beast of an integrated.

★★★★★

## PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS

**Cambridge Audio**
Edge W
**£2,500 *HFC* 447**
The Edge W power amplifier quotes 2x 100W RMS output and has oodles of power to drive pretty much any speaker. It has a neutral sound with a hint of sweetness and an upbeat nature underwritten by plenty of insight that's seriously good for the money.

★★★★★

**Longdog Audio**
P6100M
**£3,500 *HFC* 469**
They may look and feel old-fashioned, but the P6100Ms are one of those rare but happy hi-fi surprises: seriously high-end sound for mid-price money. More transparent than they have any right to be, they have a fluid and mellifluous midband and pack one hell of a punch.

★★★★★

**Exposure**
XM7/XM9
**£1,240/£1,390 *HFC* 429**
Fast, open and three dimensional, the XM9 pairing is capable of driving more awkward speaker loads to high levels without any complaint. Partnered with the XM7 preamp/DAC, Exposure's house sound means a fulsome bass, midband detail and a smooth, yet spacious treble.

★★★★★

**Rotel**
Michi P5/S5
**£3,300/£5,400 *HFC* 467**
Rotel's high-end sub-brand might not be the last word in attack and slam, and some might bemoan its lack of detail. But that misses the point: when it comes to weight, scale and a breath-takingly natural approach to making music, few combos come even close to this one.

★★★★★

## CABLES – INTERCONNECTS

### Atlas Cables
Element Achromatic

**PRICE:** £86 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Achromatic means without colour and that's very much what you get with this affordable offering. Compared with previous Atlas Element cables this has increased OCC copper content on the conductors and a new process for reduced distortion. The result is great spaciousness to the soundstage and imaging plus powerful bass.

★★★★★

### Black Rhodium
Minuet

**PRICE:** £160 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

Replacing the Prelude, this RCA interconnect is screened and employs silver-plated copper wire to improve clarity and high-frequency performance. The result is remarkably sophisticated for the money with detail, positioning of instruments, imaging and separation absolutely nailed on.

★★★★★

### Chord Company
Clearway

**PRICE:** £100 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

A fantastic performer across a broad range of different music styles, the Clearway features the company's proprietary ARAY conductor geometry and ensures that all the detail of the individual instruments remains well defined, throughout playback – adding to the overall realism of the production.

★★★★★

### Ecosse Cables
Master Reference SE

**PRICE:** £425 for 0.8m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

Designed to convey an even greater degree of transparency, detail and three dimensionality than its rival interconnects, the Master Reference SE certainly doesn't disappoint. Punchy basslines, well-defined positioning, supreme soundstage width and clear focus are very much the order of the day here.

★★★★★

### Kimber Kable
Select USB-Cu

**PRICE:** From £563 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

Terminated with hand-made purpleheart and gaboon ebony connector housings, this distinctive USB cable achieves a soundstage that is both wide and deep. The edginess of violins is deeply impressive while instruments are perfectly located across the room revealing a stunning mix of definition and clarity.

★★★★½

### QED
Performance Audio 40i

**PRICE:** £55 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

The stand-out winner of our interconnect *Group Test*, this black pearl-sheathed offering pairs a supreme sonic showing with impressive build quality and performances free from muddiness at a very generous price.

★★★★★

"A man who stops advertising to save money is like a man who stops a clock to save time."
- Henry Ford

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01276 48 56 63
shedloadcreative.co.uk

## CABLES – MAINS POWER

### Atlas Cables
Eos dd

**PRICE:** £145 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 452

Referring to 'dual drain' technology, the Eos dd is designed to act as a filter against incoming contamination. The result is an inky blackness between musical phrases and a supremely low noise floor, while detail and imaging improve as interference is banished.

★★★★★

### Black Rhodium
Stream

**PRICE:** £450 for 1.7m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 430

Black Rhodium has discovered that optimum sound quality is obtained from cables of 1.7m, hence this offering featuring silver-plated copper conductors. And who are we to argue, considering the impressive clarity and focus of instruments combined with a noise floor displaying an impressive lack of interference.

★★★★½

### Chord Company
Shawline

**PRICE:** £200 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 438

Available at a variety of lengths, the Shawline mains cable is made from three lots of 14 AWG multi-strand conductors. Test highlights include superior front-to-back imaging, with all the tonal complexities of the instruments really coming to life, delivering genuine energy to orchestral performances.

★★★★★

### Furutech
Roxy

**PRICE:** £233 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Connecting the Roxy to a source component immediately removes a layer of glare and 'glint' from the sound; tonally it's darkly translucent instead of shiny white gloss, allowing the listener to hear more into the music and appreciate the space between the notes.

★★★★★

### IsoTek
Evo3 Initium

**PRICE:** £65 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 413

IsoTek's entry-level power cable has a distinctive opalescent green finish that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noiseable step up in the quality of musical instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

### Russ Andrews
30th Anniversary YellO

**PRICE:** £65 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 423

First introduced in the nineties, the YellO benefits from years of research into the effects of mains quality. Employing pure copper conductors, this relaunched cable results in a wider, deeper soundstage and the improvement it brings to instrument focus has to be heard to be believed.

★★★★★


## DragonFly Cobalt

**DAC + Preamp + Headphone Amp**

The award-winning DragonFly Cobalt has the robust 2.1-volt output to drive almost any headphone, uses a bit-perfect digital volume control for outstanding signal-to-noise ratio, enables seamless compatibility with Apple and Android devices, and is an exceptionally competent and affordable MQA Renderer.

Cobalt's precedent-setting performance is made possible by:

- New ESS ES9038Q2M DAC chip with a minimum-phase slow roll-off filter for more natural sound.
- New Microchip PIC32MX274 microprocessor reduces current draw and increases processing speed by 33%.
- Improved power-supply filtering, specifically designed to reduce WiFi, Bluetooth, and cellular noise.
- Includes a form-fitting Carbon-level DragonTail USB-A to USB-C adaptor.

From MP3 to MQA and Hi-Res, DragonFly Cobalt preserves the body, warmth, and natural color in all your music. Experience more beauty at home and everywhere you listen.

audioquest

## NETWORK AUDIO PLAYERS

### Auralic
Altair G2.1

**PRICE:** £4,600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Not just a network-attached DAC/preamp, with the addition of onboard storage the Altair G2.1 morphs into a self-contained music hub that reveals itself to be a deliciously neutral and clean source. It presents high levels of detail without sounding mechanical or artificial and musical involvement is top notch across all genres.

★★★★★

### Cambridge Audio
Edge NQ

**PRICE:** £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Something of a departure from CA's usual fare, this network music player also combines the additional versatility of a DAC and preamp to serve up a sumptuously wide recorded acoustic, with a hugely expansive sound that partners massive punch with great precision for a clean, direct and enjoyable sound.

★★★★★

### Matrix Audio
Element X

**PRICE:** £2,800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

Supporting everything from network streaming to 768kHz PCM, DSD1024, MQA and Roon, the Element X can also comfortably drive a variety of headphones. Tardis like it hides a multitude of features in its svelte shell and operationally it proves pretty much impossible to throw off course. Be warned, it goes seriously loud.

★★★★★

### NAD
M33

**PRICE:** £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 466

Hot on the heels of 2019's M10, the M33 has raised the bar even further. In its full-size guise it offers the same style, flexibility and ease of use combined with a performance that's just as arresting with analogue sources as it is when streaming. Throw in futureproof MDC updating slots, and you're on to a winner.

★★★★★

### Naim
ND5 XS 2

**PRICE:** £2,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Delivering Naim's distinctive flare and typically impressive sound – superb low-end drive with texture and presence combined with a delicious sweetness – this Roon-compatible network music player is supremely engineered, over flowing with useful features and capable of a sparkling performance.

★★★★½

### Yamaha
WXAD-10

**PRICE:** £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 442

One of the smallest options around, this MusicCast network audio player might not look like much, but don't be fooled – it has it where it counts. Tonal balance is neutral; bass is well integrated with good detail; and the space and three dimensionality add to the realism, making it great value for money.

★★★★½

## MUSIC SERVERS

**Bluesound**
Vault 2i
**£1,100** ***HFC* 452**
If you see yourself buying into the BluOS ecosystem favoured by the Canadian brand and its cohorts, this 2TB, server, ripper and player compatible with up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM and MQA files, is a great way of starting off in one room and expanding as your system grows.

★★★★½

**Innuos**
Zenith Mk3
**From £3,000** ***HFC* 451**
With one of the best interfaces going and a potently flexible spec, the 4TB, CD ripping Zenith can be used as a Roon Core and delivers an outstanding performance that inspires confidence even for those starting out. It should be right near the top of any shortlist.

★★★★½

**Melco**
N100 EX
**£2,000** ***HFC* 462**
Following a software update back in December 2019, the N100 became the EX so it's now powered by the excellent Intelligent Music Library system – the best in the business. The sharp lines of the chassis combined with the crisp, clean sound help seal the deal.

★★★★★

**Naim**
Uniti Core
**£1,900** ***HFC* 438**
Equipped with a CD ripper and 1TB SSD, the Uniti Core takes on an understated role as it handles 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128 music files impeccably. Presentation is pleasingly neutral and it simply lets whatever network audio player is attached get on with the music.

★★★★★

## DACS

### Alpha Design Labs
Stratos

**PRICE:** £1,315 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

Remarkably flexible at the price, the Stratos offers an impressively wide-reaching range of features without compromising sound quality. The soundstage is wide and open with a refined presentation, delicate details are reproduced with breath-taking accuracy and instrument separation and location are absolutely spot on.

★★★★★

### Audiolab
M-DAC+

**PRICE:** £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 449

While some DACs can dive deeper into a recording, what's so likeable about the M-DAC+ is its poise, control and command of the bigger musical picture. With its stunning grasp of flow and tempo, there's a welcome warmth to its presentation and its solid three dimensional imaging is second to none.

★★★★★

### Chord Electronics
TT2

**PRICE:** £3,400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

We could talk about dynamic range and noise floor modulation, but the TT2 simply creates a more believable illusion of a physical presence and space than its rivals. Combining superb build, typical design flair and stunning sound quality, this is a DAC that not only believes in the superiority of digital, but goes on to prove it too.

★★★★★

### iFi Audio
Zen DAC V2

**PRICE:** £160 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 480

Supporting PCM files up to 384kHz and up to DSD256, this converter – that doubles as a headphone amp – is an absurdly talented option for the money. Connected to a digital source capable of delivering a lossless signal or better, it is consistently capable of an outstanding audio performance.

★★★★★

### Matrix Audio
Mini-i Pro 3

**PRICE:** £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Claiming the spoils in *HFC* 482's DAC *Group Test*, the Mini-i Pro 3 offers a winning combination of comprehensive spec and features, a stunning casework and – regardless of which way you elect to employ its services – it sounds absolutely superb. In short, it's the most accomplished digital front end for under a grand.

★★★★★

### PS Audio
DirectStream

**PRICE:** £4,860 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

By converting everything it's fed to DSD, the DirectStream reveals more from CDs than its rivals for a superlative analogue-like sound that has more in common with master tape than anything digital can usually muster. Low-level resolution, refinement and a majestic sense of composure add to the positives.

★★★★★


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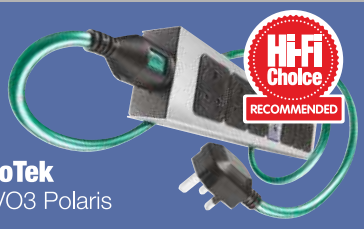


**IsoTek**
EVO3 Polaris

A six outlet distributor that removes Common and Differential mode mains noise. Delivers a marked benefit for dynamic range, a consequence of lowering the noise floor, as well as a general opening up of the soundstage.

★★★★★

**IsoTek**
EVO3 Initium

An entry-level power cable that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

## FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

### ATC SCM40

**PRICE:** £4,000
**REVIEWED:** *HFC* 480

One of the company's more compact designs, this 40-litre three-way floorstander is a sealed box cabinet with lower sensitivity than most (necessitating a pretty muscular amp to hear it at its best). However, this is a solid, robust, powerful and gutsy-sounding speaker with plenty of insight and expansive soundstaging. Subtle and delicate enough for softer moments, it's equally comfortable going loud – displaying dramatically rendered crescendos and a fine sense of space.

★★★★★

### Bowers & Wilkins 702 Signature

**PRICE:** £5,000
**REVIEWED:** *HFC* 480

Sporting B&W's tweeter-on-top, this stunning three-way comes with a glorious Datuk Gloss ebony-coloured veneer. It has a big controlled sound that fills large rooms with ease, ensuring rousing renditions of music overflowing with copious air and space and impressive soundstaging. Deft handling and plenty of punch complete the package.

★★★★½

### DALI Spektor 6

**PRICE:** £500
**REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

This *Group Test* winner positions itself at an extremely competitive price point and while it looks like a £500 loudspeaker, it sounds like it costs way more. It has a lovely natural tone, plus lots of detail and great dynamics. It sounds big, confident and expansive and yet is never overbearing or in anyway in your face. Throw into the mix a devastating combination of finesse and musicality and it's insatiable appetite for rhythm, and it's a no-brainer at the price.

★★★★★

### Kerr Acoustic K320 mk.3

**PRICE:** £7,500
**REVIEWED:** *HFC* 480

This *Group Test* winning floorstander comprehensively trounced everything else in almost every way in its roundup. It boasts a tonality that's a touch on the warm side of dry alongside a soundstage of architectural precision. In other respects it has extended yet propulsive bass, a joyously open midband and a deliciously lustrous treble. Plus it makes music great fun.

★★★★★

### Monitor Audio Gold 300

**PRICE:** £4,000
**REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

The benefits the Gold 300 brings to openness, clarity, fine detail and harmonic structure is very special. Although with vividly produced material it can verge on the 'hyper real', this is a consummate crowd pleaser that more than any rival at the price sells an idea of high-end luxury and sonic excellence that's hard to distinguish from the real thing.

★★★★★

### Spendor D7.2

**PRICE:** £4,500
**REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

A crisp, open and even-sounding loudspeaker that's impressively engaging and surprisingly dynamic – especially for a floorstander at this price. There's more space around vocals and a lighter more spry sound to cymbals, making for a lifelike sound despite its ability to remain smooth and sophisticated. The D7.2 is a modestly sized, highly capable, do-it-all loudspeaker that's well worth an audition.

★★★★★

## LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

**Chord Company**
Epic XL
**£600 1.5m, terminated *HFC* 450**
Combining elements of Chord's Signature Reference/XL with its Epic speaker cable, the XL bristles with energy and brings fantastic detail to the fore. Subtle elements are captivatingly clear, soundstage depth is enormous and clarity is supremely enhanced.

★★★★★

**Chord Company**
Odyssey X
**£150 1m, terminated *HFC* 451**
Made from the same materials as the Rumour X (*HFC* 447), the Odyssey X is designed to bring more control to dynamics and definition, and boy does it deliver. Front-to-back imaging is superb, instruments are well focused and clearly positioned while piano is full and rich.

★★★★★

**QED**
XT25
**£85 3m *HFC* 434**
Claimed to achieve a lowering of impedance compared with a traditional large cross-sectional area twin-core cable, the XT25 offers up great refinement and engaging musicality. Vocals are clear and full bodied, silence between phrases is eerily quiet and the noise floor is very low.

★★★★★

**True Colours Industries**
Storm
**£22 1m *HFC* 453**
This flexible ribbon cable is 2mm thick, making it ideal for hiding away under the carpet for tidy bi-wire hook-ups, while its tight and well-controlled performance reveals impressive openness with a spacious sound that's full and entirely uncluttered, even during crescendos.

★★★★★

## STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS

### Bowers & Wilkins
607 S2 Anniversary

**PRICE:** £450 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 470

More than just a range refresh, this baby box has had new life breathed into it in a rather skilful and expert way. So much more than the sum of its parts, the 607 S2 Anniversary Edition is highly engaging across all types of music, has a super classy treble and is the best B&W entry-level standmount yet.

★★★★★

### Fyne Audio
F1-8

**PRICE:** £6,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

If the F1-8 is anything to go by, size really does matter. If you're short of space, look elsewhere as this is a beast that won't melt into the background. But as a speaker that merges the strengths of the best standmounts and floorstanders, it is dynamic, dextrous and deeply satisfying with all types of music.

★★★★★

### Q Acoustics
Concept 30

**PRICE:** £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

The Concept 30 is magnificently free of issues, places no great demand on partnering equipment and is unfussy about positioning. Combined with great looks, it is one of the very best standmounts available at the £1,000 pricepoint. Regardless of what you play on it, it's very hard to unsettle. Superb.

★★★★★

### Sonus faber
Lumina I

**PRICE:** £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

A worthy entry point into the Sonus faber family and a genuine star in its own right, the Lumina I manages to sound bigger, more self-assured and room filling than you'd expect from looking at it. It does all this while still delivering on the virtues expected from the company and looking and feeling very

★★★★★

### Spendor
Classic 3/1

**PRICE:** £2,730 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 476

The Spendor Classic may not be as modern looking as some rivals at the price, but don't be fooled: that traditional design hides a superbly talented standmount able to produce a sensational blend of accuracy, scale, refinement and sheer unadulterated fun, and it's not too fussy about placement.

★★★★★

### Triangle
Borea BRO3

**PRICE:** £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 489

This *Group Test*-winning speaker takes all the ingrediants of an affordable standmount and makes something rather special from them. It presents music in a spacious and believable soundstage while giving weight and texture to the instruments. Its mix of energy and refinement is very hard to resist.

★★★★★

## LOUDSPEAKER SUPPORTS

**Atacama Audio**
Apollo Cyclone 6
**£100** ***HFC* 455**
Available in a choice of three sizes so you can get the height of your cabinets correctly positioned to suit your listening position, this stand removes unwanted vibrations from the performance sharpening imaging and instrument focus for a full, refined sound.

★★★★★

**Hi-Fi Racks**
X50
**From £180.48** ***HFC* 453**
Solidly built, these elegant yet classy speaker stands are available in a choice of flexible customisation options, removing all colouration from the performance and giving the impression the cabinet is floating in mid-air. Great value for money and a simple upgrade.

★★★★★

**IsoAcoustics**
GAIA II
**£300** ***HFC* 427**
Attaching the GAIA II feet to the underside of your speaker provides a high degree of isolation that gives it the opportunity to breath and display a level of clarity and openness that's easy to hear. Music just sounds right with them in place and the price is right too.

★★★★★

**Townshend Audio**
Seismic Isolation Podium
**From £1,400** ***HFC* 426**
Placing your loudspeaker on to a Seismic Isolation Podium is a revelation. The way it completely removes its interaction with its surroundings is mind blowing, bringing clarity to the entire frequency range, enabling it to communicate far more effectively.

★★★★★

## WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKERS

### Bowers & Wilkins
Formation Duo

**PRICE:** £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

It might offer relatively poor connectivity without the Formation Audio hub (an extra £650), but otherwise this is one of the best wireless speakers around thanks to its stunning design and class-leading sound which reveals impressive levels of power and poise under pressure regardless of source.

★★★★★

### Cabasse
Pearl Akoya

**PRICE:** £2,950 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

Bringing a retro futuristic touch of glamour to the wireless world, the Pearl Akoya is sold as a single speaker only – so doesn't come cheap. HDMI aside, it ticks most boxes connectivity-wise and its crisp, expansive sound ensures it will prove more than capable for audiophiles. Superlative space-age stereo at its best.

★★★★★

### KEF
LS50 Wireless II

**PRICE:** £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

Combining an extensive and highly practical specification that makes it an ideal one-stop shop with a level of overall performance that is truly outstanding, the LS50 Wireless II might not be cheap, but it is unquestionably a quite superb all-in-one solution that images better than most rivals and is sonically fabulous.

★★★★½

### KEF
LSX

**PRICE:** £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 446

It might not offer the muscle and dynamic reach of the LS50 Wireless, but the LSX is cut from the same sonic cloth. Size, style, flexibility and sound quality all impress, but it's the active ingredient which enables a performance that similarly priced passive systems will find hard to match that wins the day.

★★★★★

### Q Acoustics
Q Active 200

**PRICE:** £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

With each cabinet boasting a pair of Balanced Mode Radiators – each with its own DSP and amplifier channel – this *Group Test*-winning standmount has a hi-fi like sound that's tonally neutral, smooth and well balanced. Offering a combination of great sonics, stylish design and superb connectivity, it's the one to beat.

★★★★★

### System Audio
Legend 5.2 Silverback

**PRICE:** £2,800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

A new paradigm that shatters the notion that you need a strapping floorstander for deep, powerful bass, the Legend 5.2 Silverback musters a performance that is as coherent, palpable, tonally true and rhythmically compelling as the very best available rival at many multiples of its price.

★★★★★

## ONE-BOX SYSTEMS

**Cambridge Audio**
Evo 150
**£2,250 *HFC* 477**
In terms of functionality, the Evo 150 offers little over a dedicated streaming amp such as Hegel's H95. As an object of desire, however, it's on a different plane – as lovely to look at as it is to use and to listen to. There will be many takers for it.

★★★★★

**NAD**
M10
**£2,200 *HFC* 451**
With its super flexibility, powerful amplifier design, big front panel touchscreen and impressive BluOS platform, this is a supremely stylish offering. Sonically it's a very powerful and refined system while its definition and precision is in ample supply.

★★★★★

**Naim**
Uniti Star
**£3,500 *HFC* 433**
Fast, powerful and grippy with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive tonality, the Uniti Star might not have the forensic detail resolution of some similarly priced rivals, but it isn't far off. Otherwise it's practically impossible to find fault at the price.

★★★★★

**Novafidelity**
X14
**£690 *HFC* 446**
Deserving of praise for the functionality it manages to squeeze into such a compact and elegant chassis, the X14's well thought out and practical approach will attract those looking to take their first steps into network audio and it makes a greater second-room setup.

★★★★½

## TURNTABLES

### AnalogueWorks
TT Zero

**PRICE:** £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

Pristine without being bright, the TT Zero has fine tonal discrimination and starts and stops precisely where it should. It is able to unpick all the audio strands with ease, sounding, open and airy with plenty of sparkle and bite, a low noise floor, lucid rhythmic gait and impressively clean, controlled and tuneful bass.

★★★★★

### AVID
Volvere SP

**PRICE:** From £5,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 472

With its dynamic, detailed and confident presentation, the Volvere SP delivers all of the thrills hidden in your vinyl's grooves and adds a few more just for good measure. Rock solid, unerringly precise and gloriously natural, it's a triumph that combines the joys of a belt drive with the accuracy of a direct drive.

★★★★★

### Linn
Majik LP12/Krane

**PRICE:** £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

For such an old design, this *Group Test* winner sounds surprisingly modern. It's not as soft and rounded as it used to be, but still retains enough of the traditional Sondek character for it to charm listeners. The result is a big, confident and enjoyable sound that's tonally a little warm but with high levels of technical virtuosity.

★★★★★

### Pro-Ject
Debut PRO

**PRICE:** £700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 487

Easy to setup and uncomplicated to use, the Debut PRO has been dubbed the most audiophile Debut yet. With its newly designed tonearm, TPE-damped metal feet and 1.6kg platter, it's difficult to disagree. With plenty of room to upgrade, even in stock form, this is among the very best at the sub-£1,000 price.

★★★★★

### Rega
Planar 10

**PRICE:** £4,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

A masterpiece that is without doubt one of Rega's finest achievements, the Planar 10 manages to deliver a performance that is outstanding even at this lofty price point. Utterly unflappable, it offers incredible detail retrieval combined with a naturally low noise floor to dish up captivating vinyl execution.

★★★★★

### Technics
SL-1500C

**PRICE:** £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

The built-in phono stage is terrific, while the take-no-prisoners sonic personality sounds joyously lively, enthusiastic and 'on it'. Thanks to its legendary torque and stability, it locks down timing and rhythm with start-stop precision and its firm, deep and expressive bass adds unrivalled impetus and authority.

★★★★★

## CARTRIDGES

**Audio-Technica**
AT-OC9XEN
**£300** ***HFC*** **452**
This *Group Test*-winning moving-coil cart utilises an elliptical nude stylus mated to an assembly using two coils rather than one – which is something of an A-T trademark – and balances excellent performance with a useful boost to user friendliness, thanks to its threaded body.

★★★★★

**Hana**
Umami Red
**£3,400** ***HFC*** **483**
Translating from Japanese as 'brilliant" and 'gorgeous', this *Group Test*-winning low-output moving-coil cart more than lives up to its name. It sounds beautiful with a superb combination of power, poise, musicality, detail and insight, and makes music sound utterly magical.

★★★★★

**Michell**
Cusis S
**£1,275** ***HFC*** **479**
With a wonderfully refined but potent performance, this *Group Test*-winning moving-coil cartridge has user-friendly dimensions and stunning bass. The result is that it is deftly able to deliver a superb performance with a variety of different musical styles and setups.

★★★★★

**MoFi**
UltraGold
**£1,500** ***HFC*** **485**
This good-looking medium-output moving-coil cartridge from the US record label retains the warmth and air we've come to expect of MC offerings, but partners it with the sort of impressive trackability you'll struggle to match at the price. A real smooth operator.

★★★★★

## PHONO STAGES

### Chord Electronics
Huei

**PRICE:** £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 459

The Huei's appeal extends from its rock-solid build and playful, sphere-based control system to its impressive knack of extracting the best from a turntable/cartridge combo without being too painfully honest about the ropier aspects of less-than-pristine recordings.

★★★★★

### Hegel
V10

**PRICE:** £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

It might be fiddly to setup and ensuring you pick the best combination of DIP switches for your cartridge isn't the most of intuitive of processes, but the V10 is effortlessly smooth, gloriously insightful and impeccably voiced for a crystal-clear performance with a wide range of different MM or MC pick-ups.

★★★★★

### iFi Audio
Zen Phono

**PRICE:** £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 476

An astonishing performance and superb flexibility. Until you find yourself at the price where features like adjustable loading and capacitance are possible, the spec for the asking price is outstanding. This is one of a tiny number of designs anywhere near this price that can do justice to pretty much any cartridge under £500.

★★★★★

### Musical Fidelity
M6x Vinyl

**PRICE:** £1,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

This multi-talented design offers a superb combination of excellent connectivity, versatile loading and gain options, a great user interface and excellent sound. Tonally it's very neutral with a crisp clean and spacious tone that's less euphonic than some may like, but nonetheless fun to listen to.

★★★★★

### Pro-Ject
Phono Box RS2

**PRICE:** £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

The RS2's transparency is genuinely impressive, even judged at the price and its lack of colouration is potentially very useful indeed. This is the product you buy when you're already satisfied with the tonal balance of your system and simply need a well-specified phono stage to complete it.

★★★★★

### Tom Evans
MicroGroove+ X mkII

**PRICE:** £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

The closest thing the UK has to a phono stage guru, Evans designed the circuit for this stunning stage in 1989. Unapologetically plain, light and unassuming, the MicroGroove cuts the sonic mustard like nothing else to make even mid-priced turntables sound far higher end than they actually are. Superb.

★★★★★

## IN-EAR HEADPHONES

**Audeze**
LCDi3
**£900 *HFC* 478**
Clarity, subtlety and coherence meet scale, air and an utterly compelling sense of dynamic freedom on this stunning *Group Test*-winning planar magnetic in-ear. With great poise and even handedness, it never gives the impression of trying too hard.

★★★★★

**Oriveti**
OH500
**£500 *HFC* 451**
Combining an airiness with low-end extension that most rivals can only dream of, the OH500's stylish resin enclosures house four Knowles balanced armatures (two for bass and two for the midrange) with an 8mm dynamic bass driver for an enjoyably vivid performance.

★★★★★

**Sennheiser**
IE 900
**£1,100 *HFC* 478**
If dynamic dexterity and resolution that would shame a spy satellite are what you crave, the IE 900 scours the noise floor like few other in-ear offerings at the price. Articulation, separation and drive are equally impressive while treble extension and refinement are superb.

★★★★★

**Bowers & Wilkins**
PI7
**£349 *HFC* 478**
The first pair of True wireless in-ears from B&W does a supreme job of capturing fine details and stitching them into a wider whole. Bass extension is deep without being at the expense of speed and noise cancelling works without effecting the tonal balance.

★★★★★

## HEADPHONES

### Audio-Technica
ATH-M50xBT

**PRICE:** £180 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 450

Taking its M50x and turning it into a very capable wireless design (thanks to Bluetooth v5.0) without altering its sonic character, Audio-Technica has come up trumps here. Balance and refinement join crunching bass, impressive three dimensionality and decent noise-cancelling to seal the deal.

★★★★★

### Bowers & Wilkins
PX7

**PRICE:** £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

Although it's no match for a high-end wired design, the noise-cancelling abilities of this wireless closed-back model are ideal for music on the move – offering an elevated listening experience amidst the hustle and bustle of the city. An essential audition if you're serious about enjoying your music out and about.

★★★★★

### Philips
Fidelio L3

**PRICE:** £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

This wireless noise-cancelling headphone *Group Test* winner ticks pretty much every box at the price. Boasting aptX HD, a 38 hour battery life and decent noise cancelling, it is well built and comfortable. And while the accompanying app makes operation a doddle, the music just flows in an easy going, unforced way.

★★★★★

### Rosson Audio Design
RAD-0

**PRICE:** £2,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

A largely viceless implementation of planar magnetic headphone that delivers the commendable virtues of the design with very few of the downsides. Comfortable and well made, the RAD-0 sounds absolutely superb.

★★★★★

### Sennheiser
Momentum 3

**PRICE:** £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

With a Bluetooth performance that makes it hard to believe this is really a wireless offering, the Momentum might just be the most consistently entertaining performer Sennheiser has ever produced. Excellent design, fabulous features, subsonic bass and impeccable noise cancelling complete the package.

★★★★★

### T+A
Solitaire P-SE

**PRICE:** £3,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

Shaving as much as 40 percent off the price of its flagship P headphone, while retaining more than 60 percent of the capability, this is a stunning open-back, planar magnetic T+A offering. It might be expensive, but the sheer levels of performance and the quality of the build and design mean it is one of the best.

★★★★★

## PORTABLE DACS

**AudioQuest**
DragonFly Cobalt
**£270 *HFC* 463**
With a relatively low 24-bit/96kHz sample rate, expectations for the Cobalt aren't high until realising it means there's no need for USB driver software. Native MQA decoding is also supported and the open and richly detailed sound make this the best DragonFly offering yet.

★★★★★

**Chord Electronics**
Hugo 2
**£1,800 *HFC* 428**
An essential audition, the Hugo 2 is not just a portable DAC/headphone amp, but the best hi-fi digital converter available at or near the price. Music ebbs and flows along in an organic and unforced way and it images with stunning pinpoint precision.

★★★★★

**Chord Electronics**
Mojo 2
**£450 *HFC* 488**
It might be £50 more than its predecessor, but the follow-up Mojo makes the superb original sound opaque, coloured and closed-in by comparison. Prepare to experience complex textures, limpid transparency, striking stereo and unnoticed details like never before.

★★★★★

**iFi Audio**
xDSD
**£400 *HFC* 439**
Justifying its inclusion on sound alone, the xDSD delivers a wide variety of musical styles with admirable clarity and precision. It's engaging, lively sonics and versatile connectivity make it equally adept for mobile or desktop use and the only minor downside is its battery life.

★★★★★

# Hi-Fi Choice Reader Classified

## Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

**These pages** are a must-read if you're thinking about buying used kit, or if you have hi-fi you want to sell. It's free – simply submit your ad with no more than **50 words** (we reserve the right to edit it if not), remembering to include your email, phone number and county. Simply email your ad to: **letters@hifichoice.co.uk**. This service is open to private advertisers only. Just **one** ad per household and please note that images are for illustration only and **do not** represent what is for sale.

## FOR SALE

**PRIMARE** i30 amp £650, Primare CD31 £650. Both black, boxed with remotes: **0208 4649055 or email: billmilla@virginmedia.com**

**PMC** DB1+ transmission line monitors, Rosewood veneer. Cyrus 8 Amp and CD6 both silver. Mission Stance sand-filled stands are available. No original boxes, but manuals. Sensible offers please: **01249 655280 or email: dorix1725@hotmail.com (Wiltshire).**

**ATLAS** Hyper 2.0 speaker cable 4m Atlas plugs as new £135 ono. Kudos KS-1 speaker cable 4m, Chord Ohmic plugs as new £135 ono. Ecosse Master Reference 2.0 DCT RCA 0.7m good condition offers. MS HD Power double wall sockets, silver, boxed x3 offers: **email: stevecousins136@gmail.com**

**ICON AUDIO** MB845 Mk.1 monoblock amplifiers. Upgraded to SE version with new Mundorf capacitors. New 845 valves on one amp. Boxed. Great powerful sound. Sensible offers: **07717 752288 or email: captain_b99@yahoo.co.uk (Bristol).**

**NAIM** NAC-N172XS streaming preamplifier. Unmarked. Full Naim service November 2021. Complete with original packaging & accessories £900: **07748 334704 or email: dave@davedeeks.com. (North Tyneside).**

**BOWERS & WILKINS** CM9 floorstanding speakers in black and in excellent condition. Great sound and they work very well with a range of amplifiers. Boxed, service manual, plinths and rear plugs £950: **01539 732006 or email: lindamarycott@btinternet.com (Cumbria).**

**TASCAM** DA-45HR digital audio tape deck. Drum hours 1,753. £750. AKAI GX-636 reel-to-reel stereo tape recorder. £1,400. Both in excellent condition. Price includes shipping: **e-mail mjcm4p@gmail.com (Gloucestershire).**

**PRO-JECT** 2 Xperience Classic Acrylic boxed, but no cart £320. Mitchell Technoarm £400 ONO with mounting plates for Rega and Mitchell GyroDec. Neat Motive 1 Rosewood finish, there are some chips to the veneer, £400 ONO: **07444 891217 or email: georgemoraitis2002@yahoo.com. (NE London).**

**NAIM** NAT05 tuner, 'Red Dot' version with Phillips tuner Head. No marks or blemishes and original box included £300. Buyer collects or pays postage: **email: oakey1963@gmail.com**

**KEF** Reference 5 speakers, Satin American Walnut, all accessories, boxed £8,750. KEF R300 Gloss Black, boxed £400. From BR3 5TL: **07973 132199 or email: time2gojb@gmail.com**

**ATACAMA** Nexus 6i speaker stands (satin black) and tub of Atacama Atabites. As new. £50. Collect only. **01529 304908 (Lincolnshire).**

**NESPA** professional optical disc finaliser mint condition with manual £395. AudioDesk Systeme CD Improver VGC £150. Cash on collection: **07708 431963 (Crewe, Cheshire).**

**NAIM** Nait 1 (Red LED). Totally original amplifier in good condition. Reluctant sale. Sounds superb £390: **07410 408954.**

**CLEARAUDIO** 300Hz calibrated strobe and 12in test disc. Professional set-up tool for the discerning amateur audiophile or for the professional workshop. Never used £95 inc p&p: **07976 606369 or email: Sws999@btinternet.com (Devon).**

**VERTERE** Pulse-B analogue RCA 1.65m interconnect cable (RRP £949). Boxed as new £400: **07979 080525 (Lancashire).**

**ICON AUDIO** Stereo 40 mkIII with Jensen caps and recent valves £800 ono. Buyer collects: **07531 835575.**

**QUAD** ESL988 loudspeakers in black. Superb condition, full service history, with mains leads, instruction manual and original boxes and fillers £1,000 ono: **01827 284023 or 07855 579797 (Tamworth, Staffs).**

**SONY** ST-SDB900 tuner, VGC with remote control and manual, fully working order, silver finish. £100 or near offer plus postage: **01902 733821 or email: malcolmcostley@hotmail.com (West Midlands).**

**LEAK** Stereo 20 power/preamp, dark grey £500: **07988 081094**

**CYRUS** X-Power amps x2. Owned from new, immaculate condition, boxed, brushed black. Both come with Kimber power cords and QED RCA interconnects £1,200: **email: ben1972rees@gmail.com (Bucks).**

**CAMBRIDGE** 651 MM/MC phono amp £75. Audio-Technica 33EV MC cartridge £135. Marantz PM6004 amplifier £75.

**BUYING TIPS** **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!

DALI Zensor 1 speakers £75. Sansui SAP201 amp/DAC £75. Pioneer PDR609 CD player/recorder £75. Hi-Fi magazines free to collect: **01691 610589 (Shropshire).**

**SONUS FABER** Electa Amator speakers complete with original wood/stone stands. Exceptional condition £1,750: **07741 416584 (Lincs).**

**FOCAL** Utopia headphones £1,800 ono. Not a lot of use as I prefer to listen through loudspeakers: **01656 733354 or email: pauldavies242000@yahoo.co.uk.**

**NAIM** Uniti Mk1 serviced by Naim in 2018 and upgraded to 24-bit/192kHz spec, unmarked condition with all supplied accessories and box, £700: **07788 975856 or email: tyl590@aol.com (Gloucestershire).**

**CYRUS** DAC-X brushed black, excellent condition, boxed £450: **email: rachel_2290@hotmail.com (Berks).**

**MICHELL** GyroDec SE turntable with Origin Live Encounter 3C arm. Michell Orbe platter kit. Sensible offers only please. Cash only, buyers collect. Near M25/A21. **Email: billytkippington@gmail.com**

**ICON AUDIO** MB845 Mk.1 monoblock amplifiers. Upgraded to SE version with new Mundorf capacitors. New 845 valves on one amp. Boxed. Great powerful sound. Sensible offers: **07717 752288 or email: captain_b99@yahoo.co.uk (Bristol).**

**ART AUDIO** Concerto MKII 50WPC valve power amp. Also, Music First transformer-based preamp. All in immaculate condition. £1,500 and £600, a great combo which I can split: **01981 242067 or email: treesurglee@aol.com (Monmouth).**

**CAMBRIDGE AUDIO** CXN V2 streamer, lunar grey, excellent condition and light use. Original box and remote: £500. Collection only: **01280 469852 or email: davidsangster53@gmail.com. (Buckingham).**

**REGA** Planar 8 turntable with Apheta 3 MC cartridge fitted. Only 9 months old. All original packaging included: £1,950. Collect only: **07910 387221 or email: philbailey46@gmail.com (Epsom, Surrey).**

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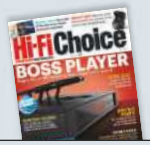


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# REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Exciting things coming your way in the month ahead

## 1 SWEET EMO-TION

Paramore's Hayley Williams has started a 20-part podcast series called *Everything Is Emo*. The new weekly show is part of BBC Sounds' *Back To Back* series, and the first episode – titled *All Music Is Emotional* – is available to listen to now and includes tracks by the Postal Service, My Chemical Romance, Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Wet Leg.

"Not long ago, people started calling me a 'veteran' of my scene and of the music industry," Williams said. "It sounds so funny to me because most of the time I still feel like a fan…. I'm really excited to have the opportunity to publicly nerd out about bands and songs that make my favourite subgenre feel like home to me."

## 2 HANDY ANDY

Made back in 1990 and not really shown since, *Songs For Drella* is a film capturing the first on-stage reunion of former bandmates Lou Reed and John Cale – co-founders of the Velvet Underground – as they perform, without an audience, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Inspired to reunite by the death of Andy Warhol, the Velvets' former manager and producer, Reed and Cale created the *SFD* album (Drella was their nickname for Warhol – part Dracula, part Cinderella) and this movie, previously only available on VHS and Laserdisc. You can watch it now at: MUBI.com.

## 3 TAPE HEADS

*Whatever Happened to the C86 Kids?: An Indie Odyssey* is a forthcoming book published by Nine Eight in which author Nige Tassell tracks down the 22 bands that contributed to the legendary C86 tape released by *NME* back in, of course, 1986, to discover what happened next. Among those featured are Primal Scream, The Wedding Present, Half Man Half Biscuit, The Soup Dragons, Fuzzbox, The Mighty Lemon Drops, The Pastels, Age of Chance and Bogshed. "Some became rock stars," says Tassell. "Some became driving instructors. One became both." It'll cost you £16.40 for the hardback edition, £7.19 for the Kindle.

## 4 CLASSIC FINISH

Bassocontinuo, Italian equipment support manufacturer, has launched a McIntosh-specific finish option for its entry-level Classic Line (2.1) range of AV equipment supports, giving owners a range of personalised support options for their components and systems.

According to the bumf: "The new Mc Edition option is available across the entire five-strong Classic Line (2.1) range and has been created to complement McIntosh electronics with key detailing to mirror the famous signature blue watt meters."

We're talking blue finishes, of course. The Mc Edition Classic 2.1 line is available now, priced from £2,675 (Base £690, plus three shelves at £665 each).

## 5 COMPLETE CONTROL

Lypertek has announced firmware updates to the recently launched PurePlay Z5 (p63), the company's first earbuds with Active Noise Cancelling. Custom control presets can now be saved on the

PureControl ANC app designed specifically for the PurePlay Z5 earphones. Additional updates include an Auto Power Off setting that improves overall battery life by turning off the earbuds during periods of inactivity. The PureControl ANC app will now also display the individual battery levels for each earbud. More info at: lypertek.com.

## 6 LET'S GET COSEY

Cosey Fanni Tutti of Throbbing Gristle and Chris & Cosey fame has a new book out called *Re-Sisters*, the story of three women consumed by their passion for life expressed through their art.

The book came about when, in 2018, Fanni Tutti was commissioned to write the soundtrack to a film about Delia Derbyshire, the pioneering electronic composer. While researching Derbyshire's life, Tutti became immersed in her story and uncovered fascinating parallels with her own life. At the same time, she began reading about Margery Kempe, the fifteenth-century mystic visionary who wrote the first English-language autobiography. The bumf says: "Each lived on the fringes of a world dictated by patriarchal forces; each relentlessly pursued the expansion and enrichment of their life through their creative work".

Cosey will be appearing live in-conversation about *Re-Sisters* throughout the year across the UK. The first dates announced are: Wednesday 17 August, London, ICA and Thursday 25 August, Glasgow, Monorail.

*Re-Sisters* is available in various forms via Faber as follows: Hardback £18.99, Ebook £16.99, Audiobook (read by the author) £26.99 and Limited Edition £150.

## BASSOCONTINUO INTRODUCES BLUE THEMED STANDS FOR MCINTOSH KIT

Picture credit: Chris Carter (Cosey Fanni Tutti)

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**ALSO:**

**REVIEWS** Astell&Kern UW100 earbuds, Eclipse TD307MK3 loudspeaker, Q Acoustics Concept 50 floorstanding speaker, Philips Fidelio T1 true-wireless in-ears, a retro appreciation of the Marantz CD-72 Bitstream silver disc spinner, plus a *Group Test* of affordable floorstanders.

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